

“Religion”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for November 15th 2015 (25th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Mark 12: 38-44, 13: 1-2

Let's name it right off the bat. Let's name the fact that this morning is not an easy morning for those who consider themselves to be a “religious” person...and I trust no one would go to the trouble of being here this morning did they not consider themselves...at least a somewhat “religious” person. For all who bear even a tiny fragment of the burden that goes with the word “religion”, this cannot be an easy morning. Between the texts to which we have just been treated...and the news out of Paris—news from which most of us have likely been incapable of averting our eyes all weekend long—this is not an easy morning to be part of a religious institution: *any* religious institution.

Let's begin...let's begin with our texts.

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The 12th and 13th chapters of Mark's Gospel...

...presumably the oldest of the Gospels, the Gospel that appears to have decisively shaped Matthew, Luke and perhaps even aspects of John...

...the 12th and 13th chapters of Mark's Gospel bring us toward the climax of the story Mark sets out to tell, a climax that takes place on a hill we call “Golgotha” on a Friday we oddly choose to call “Good”. And so, not surprisingly Mark, chapters 12 & 13, depict facets of the brewing conflict into which Jesus has entered with key members of the leadership of the Jewish people: which is to say, key members of the *religious* leadership of the Jewish people.

And so our text begins with a condemnation aimed at the scribes: a condemnation which, while far less weighty (and far less lengthy) than the comparable condemnation found in Matthew's version of this episode, is certainly not one in which Jesus minces words!

*“Beware of the scribes,
who like to walk around in long robes,
and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,
and to have the best seats in the synagogues
and places of honour at banquets!
They devour widows' houses
and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.
They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

Quite appropriately—as if on cue—quite appropriately that condemnation is immediately followed by the arrival onto the Temple Mount...

...this entire section of Mark's Gospel is set in Jerusalem, specifically in the Temple district...

...quite appropriately, that condemnation is followed by the arrival of a poor widow who places her entire livelihood in the Temple treasury, sparking from Jesus an entirely apropos observation: namely that the widow—though her offering in absolute terms pales beside what others are giving—actually gives more. How? In the sense that she gives everything, whereas they (the prominent leaders of the faith community) only give a small portion of what is theirs. Then, having made that uncomfortable observation, Jesus tops it all...

...tops it all—in a way that appears to have contributed to his subsequent conviction by the Jewish court—tops it all by assuring his followers that the Temple, the **central** Jewish religious institution of his time, would soon crumble to the ground, a prediction which, within a generation, turned out to be spot on the money. How to win friends and influence people this is not! More to the point, Christ's relentless critique of religious institutions and religious leaders can give us greater sympathy for the countless people we know who insist upon describing themselves as "spiritual...but not religious." Who can blame them? Who really, at the end of the day, can blame them??

Then again!

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I would have to be fairly dense were I to try to pretend that these texts merely speak to religiosity, merely speak to religious-institutions in a general sort of way, without acknowledging the fact that they speak, quite specifically, to the **leadership** of the religions. Jesus does not speak merely against religious people-in-general, but quite specifically against the scribes. And while it is the case that this sermon bears the one word title, "religion"...it could just as easily bear the one word title: "Clergy".

Indeed. Call it coincidence...or call it serendipity...but earlier this week I found myself part of an online conversation in which one of the participants relayed the following story. It involves my friend's Polish grandmother, widowed in the mid-1930s in depression era rural Manitoba. During her husband's illness, and after his death, the local priest continued to press her for monetary gifts to the church, going so far as to imply that the absolution and community provided by the church might just be withdrawn were she no longer able to give 'generously' to the Church. The widow's mite, indeed: this woman being, at the time, the mother of ten children, the youngest of whom was only seven when she lost her husband. God help us!

God help us because that story describes such a horrific distortion of the Gospel...such a horrific abuse of “religion”...that it is hard to know where to begin. But this much I will say.

I have no doubt...some 35 years after the fact...I have no doubt but that (when I found myself drawn to Christianity) the reason I eventually ended up in a Protestant denomination and yes, specifically in this far from perfect United Church of Canada, owes much to the fact that I instinctively knew that I needed to be in a place where it was okay to question authority, including the authority of those whose authority comes with the wearing of these flowing robes, robes with which our Lord appears to have been less than fully enamoured. Without denying that there are congregations that make life impossible for their ministers...

...clergy abuse *is* a real problem...and when it happens it is no laughing matter...

...without pretending such abuses don't occur, the fact remains that I would not wish to be a part of a Christian faith-community in which I, as part of the authorized leadership, was **not** subject to the loving oversight of the community of faith. And yes, I'll go further. While I have yet to serve in a congregation in which I was not, for the most part, the most knowledgeable person vis a vis the scriptural and theological foundations of the Christian faith, it is also the case that I have yet to serve in a congregation in which I was not surrounded by many folks who—**my book learning notwithstanding**—were more generous with their time, talent, and treasure; more faithful in their praying; and more deeply committed to the life of the Church than anything I brought to the table. That's why we stress, in the Protestant stream, the “Priesthood of *all* believers!” That's why we stress, in our at times exhausting United Church polity, the very checks and balances that can be terribly time consuming and more than occasionally frustrating, but which seek to make it impossible for anyone (clergy or lay) to become a law unto themselves. And yes, while it may be true that you need me (or folks such as Clare, Fred, Bob, Chris and Peggy) to share the Word with you on a Sunday morning, we most definitely need you to keep us honest, to keep us humble, to keep us aware of the fact that every religious institution...and every leader of those religious institutions...must never lose sight of one key distinction, namely...namely...that we are here to serve God, not to pretend that we are God!

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Had it not been...had it not been...for the events of Friday evening...I might well have ended right there. But you know: when you settle—a full month in advance—upon christening a sermon with that one word title, “religion”...and you find yourself finalizing that sermon for presentation less than 48 hours after a small group of fervent believers in **their** religion commit unspeakable horrors in

the name of their religion...I think it's pretty hard to pretend those events did not, in fact, take place. And you know: it will not do...it will not do simply to pretend (as many people I dearly love are still trying to pretend) that such events have nothing to do with religion, nothing to do with religion-in-general...nothing to do with the religion-of-Islam in particular. On the contrary!

If, when people say, such events have “nothing to do with religion”, “nothing to do with Islam”, they are merely insisting that such actions are a grotesque distortion of the essence of religion...a grotesque distortion of what Islam, at its best, stands for: then I have no need to disagree. But if we are wishing to pretend that violence...sacred violence...has no bearing upon religion, then we need to think again. Speaking personally, I need go no further than my experience, anytime I take folks on a tour of the Bible—beginning with the Old and continuing on to the New Testament—any time I lead folks on such a tour, regardless of which curriculum I use, I soon discover that people inevitably struggle with the amount of violence to be found, especially (though by no means exclusively) in portions of the Old Testament. Given my own Jewish background, and my love of the Hebrew Scriptures, I refuse to permit those violent sections to destroy my love for the Bible, though I do insist upon bringing that violence to the foot of the Cross, so that the Cross of my Saviour might bring healing to that violence as part of the gift of love he offered on that Cross. But what I will not do—what I refuse to do—is to pretend that such violence is not a part of the reality of the religion to which I adhere. Nor would I pretend that incidents of violence in the history of the Christian West have nothing to do with Christianity. It is part of our reality, and no one is helped when we pretend otherwise.

In much the same way...in much the same way...no one is helped when we pretend that sacred violence has nothing whatsoever to do with Islam. The very fact...the very fact that the Prophet Mohammed was himself no stranger to the role of warrior, coupled with the fact that Islam recognizes no separation of Mosque and State within the Islamic realm, may well suggest that Islam has some particular soul-searching to do, where sacred violence is concerned. While we, as Christians, have no business telling our Islamic brothers and sisters *how* they might best sort through those far from straightforward questions, we most certainly do have the responsibility not only to pray that they not shirk from that challenge, but also the responsibility of not encouraging them to deny the nature of the challenge they face. Nor should we avoid insisting that our own leaders refrain from the sort of political correctness that will cause them to steer clear from asking the hard questions and speaking the difficult truths that so desperately need to be spoken at such a time as this. Because the bottom line is this!

As human beings we are drawn to religion, for the simple reason that nothing lifts us higher than to catch a *glimpse* of the truth about the world in which we live. And yet sadly, as human beings, the stark reality is that nothing is

likelier to cause us to act in beastly ways, than the conviction that we are in *possession* of that truth.

And may the God of every grace and kindness shine upon us all—every clan, every tribe, every race—shine upon us with the light of God's own truth, God's own goodness, mercy and peace. To bring us peace...and at the end...to set us truly free!

Through Christ. Amen!