



**Proper , Year B – November 8, 2009**

**Mark 12:38-44**

**A homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham**

Let's talk about the scribes. One might easily get the impression that being a scribe was tantamount to being a first class villain. Watch out, Jesus. Here come the scribes.

But let's be fair. The scribes actually performed an essential role. They were the institutional memory of the law. The law then was a purely religious law and included the Mosaic law or Torah, derived from the first five books of the Bible. That would include not only the ten commandments, but also some 613 other precepts and statutes. Because scribes were the repository of the law, they had to remember the law and remember it perfectly. Then they would pass the law down to the next generation by way of a cadre of students who would follow them around hearing and memorizing every word they uttered. The system allowed no room for error or revision. What a student learned, a student taught the next generation – word for word.

The scribes also interpreted and administered the law. Like judges today, they made decisions and issued judgments. Because the law was the very framework for the life of the Jewish people, the work of the scribes was critical to their society. And scribes, much like lawyers and judges today came to be highly respected members of the community. They were even more highly revered than the fathers of their students. After all, the fathers only brought their sons to this life. The divine wisdom of the scribe would bring the student to the world to come. They were called "master," "teacher," or "rabbi," which means great one.

This is the milieu in which Jesus lived and taught. Like the scribes of his day, Jesus as a teacher was accorded enormous respect and had followers who memorized his every word. And much of what Jesus said, therefore, was preserved accurately and could be faithfully reduced to writing even decades after his death and resurrection. Unlike the scribes, however, Jesus, taught with authority. He could make law. He could pardon. And, thus, he challenged those in powerful places. And among those in powerful positions were the scribes. And the way they used that power is what Jesus criticizes in Mark's Gospel morning,

Here were these highly competent and well-regarded scribes exploiting their status and power. Much like the elite of any age, they lived into their prestige: the best clothes, the best seats in the house, the longest, most ostentatious prayers. And with their authority to interpret and apply law, they had considerable power. Thus, they could prescribe excessive that the poor give from their scarcity to the temple treasury, while they give easily from their abundance. Hence, the widow, a woman at a time when a husbandless woman had no status and often no means of support, is devoured, straining toward the scribes' prescriptions for giving to the Temple treasury to the point that she will have nothing left to live on. We may well say that the widow was virtuous to a fault, but God hardly expects anyone to leave themselves destitute. And that is not the main point of the story. The scribes and their exploitation of their positions, after all, are the focal point of Jesus' condemnation.

Those with similar attitudes in more modern times have exploited their position and power to devastating effect, the worst examples' being tyrants and empire builders like the Caesars, Napoleon, Hitler, and the Taliban, who employ violence to force others live according to their notions of how the world should live. Today we remember with respect those who lost their lives in the conflicts bred by those who used their power in attempts to bully others into submission to their way of life.

Jesus' condemnation of the scribes, therefore, is a reminder to us that we always must remain reluctant to assume we know all there is to know about what is right and what is wrong. And that we should be more reluctant to impose our views on others, and even more reluctant to punish or exploit others who see things differently than we do.

Let me wrap up by noting emphatically that not all scribes were overly enamored with their status and power. Not long before Jesus' lambasting of the scribes in Mark's gospel, he had encountered a scribe who understood the great commandments, to love good and to love neighbor.

Some say that when Adam and Eve tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, it marked humanity's wresting from God the power to determine what was right and wrong. That is a power best exercised only in full embrace of those two great commandments. Love God with our whole hearts, soul, mind, and body, and love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.