

Rev. Gaston Warner
November 8, 2009

Secrets of the Kingdom of God

Mark 12:38-44

I love the bible, it is a wonderful book. The bible is God's self-revelation of himself to us, and in its' pages we learn the secrets of the kingdom of God. The Bible reveals to us who we really are and how we are to live. And, often, this extraordinary book of books can be extraordinarily annoying.

One of the annoying bits of the bible is how God insists on teaching us what it means to be his children by telling us stories—stories of creation, stories of failings and salvation, stories of Israel, parables and observations.

If you are like me sometimes you just want to know the facts; give me the details; spell it out for me; tell me what to do. But the bible tracks God's people over many thousands of years telling stories about their triumphs and tragedies, their fears and flaws, and how God loves, forgives, and protects them—even as they continually turn away from God. And then, in Jesus Christ, we are told that their story is our story and that God's lessons to them are our lessons; that their fears and flaws are reflected in our lives. And that is when the bible gets personal, and we begin straining to hear its secrets, for in those secrets we find life that goes beyond life.

Today's passage lands us in a particularly contentious section in the gospel of Mark where we see Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious leaders trying to entrap or befuddle Jesus. Jesus is not exactly gentle with them, but continues to teach them about the kingdom of God.

Just prior to today's passage in Mark, Jesus even commends one of the scribes for being open to the secrets of the kingdom of God. The scribe had asked Jesus "what is the greatest

commandment”? And had then agreed with Jesus’ answer saying, “You are right, to love God with all one’s heart and mind and strength and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self is indeed much more important than any other part of religion.”

But even as Jesus acknowledges this scribe’s wisdom, he also offers a warning to others who behave hypocritically. [Vs 38-40]

So what is the sin of these scribes? There are several symptoms of their sin, but the root cause is that they neither love God—for instead of glorifying God they glorified themselves; nor do they love neighbor—for instead of caring for those who are vulnerable they devour widow’s houses; and perhaps even worse, they say long prayers, for the sake of appearances—I’m with Jesus on this rebuke!

Jesus is very direct with the hypocritical scribes and says, “They will receive the greater condemnation”. They are supposed to be shepherds of the people of Israel, but instead they are leading the people astray.

Now it is easy to say Amen to Jesus’ words and to despise these scribes; to hope and cheer for their demise. But take a moment to think about these leaders. Back up a few years to when they were young people searching for God’s call on their lives. Why did they become scribes in the first place? Certainly a few may have entered into the vocation for suspect reasons, but the majority probably wanted with all their heart to faithfully serve God.

So what went so badly wrong in their lives that Jesus specifically denounces them? The problem is that the Fall really happened. Sin really entered our world and we are, all of us, caught up in it. The scribes began with a desire to do good but they were swept away by power, praise and possessions and slowly turned away from their first love. It is not just that the scribes

had gone a little askew—they had gotten it exactly wrong. They had become addicted to praise and power instead of listening to the secrets of the kingdom of God.

The scribes fell into the same trap that so many of their ancestors had fallen into, and they fell into the same pit that you and I fall into—you know the one where we begin by wanting to serve God and do good for the world and end up desiring only that the world do good for us.

The failing of the scribes is particularly troubling because they understood God's law better than anyone, at least with their minds. They had studied the scriptures, but the knowledge had not migrated into their hearts. Perhaps this is why Jesus taught so often through stories and observations, instead of lists and facts—so that our hearts might comprehend. For when our hearts are changed, everything changes.

Have you ever seen the movie Good Will Hunting? It was a popular late 90's movie where Matt Damon plays a young man who is a prodigy of particular genius but struggling with a background of physical abuse, and the demons of his past hold him captive. There is one powerful scene where Robin Williams plays the role of his psychiatrists; a particularly difficult task because Damon's character, not wanting to sit through the sessions and being a genius, has read all the psychological books, understands the techniques of the trade and tries to circumvent the process at every point.

But after breaking through some of Damon's defenses we see Robin Williams confront Damon about the abuses that hold him captive. Williams says "it's not your fault", Damon says, yeah, I know—and he does know because he has read all the books—he understands with his mind that it is not his fault. Williams moves closer and says it again, "it's not your fault" Damon sort of laughs and says, "Yeah, I know." Williams keeps repeating it—he repeats it 10 times--and you begin to see Damon's character change, you see him transform from someone who

understands something with his mind, to someone who accepts it with his heart; from knowledge that informs to truth that transforms. And for the first time he really accepts—deep down in his being-- that what happened to him was not his fault

The scribes understood the kingdom of God up here (head) but they did not understand it here (heart). In their effort to protect the law of God from corruption, they themselves had corrupted its very foundation. They sought to do good, but instead of helping people to keep God's law, they actually prevented people from coming to God. They wanted to love God, but ended up loving only themselves; they wanted to protect the vulnerable, but devoured them instead. And when God came in Jesus Christ they could not recognize or even accept him. They started off right but sin slowly, probably imperceptibly, turned their eyes away from God.

I'll never forget hearing the pastor of my home church speak to a group of us who were deriding Jim Bakker, the corrupt Evangelist. No doubt that Bakker deserved the criticism, but everyone was shocked when our pastor said, "you know I was friends with Jim Bakker in seminary. I remember when he was a young man, full of promise and potential and a heart to serve God, and then I watched him slowly be consumed by power and greed, and I grieve for him." Talk about a conversation stopper!

I suppose it is just human nature that we like to associate ourselves with the heroes of stories. But unless we can see ourselves in the scribes, this story has no power to teach us about ourselves and whisper the secrets of the kingdom of God in our ear. They had begun by trusting in God, but ended up trusting only in themselves. This is a pattern in the Bible with God's people and we are part of that pattern.

The next passage of today's reading from Mark is [Vs. 41-44], enter the widow. Now the widow is not so much the heroine of the story as a dramatic counter-point to the scribes.

Many people lift up the widow's act as one we should emulate because she gave so sacrificially—but then again the story of the widow is usually read in isolation from the rebuke of the scribes just before it.

You see the irony of the story, (and you can't read the bible unless you understand irony because it is used so often to underline a point); the irony of the story is that this very widow is one of those being devoured by the scribes. Yet she is supporting, with her two copper coins, the very system that employs the scribes. By God's law, the community of faith is to care for widows who are financially poor. But this widow is giving all she has to support the religious structure. She has listened to the scribes speak about God's law, and now she is responding by giving all she has. The widow's action is not necessarily one to be emulated—but a crazy counterintuitive move that, with its simple trust, highlights the hypocrisy of the scribes.

The story actually has a double irony—first that the widow would give all she has to a system that is taking advantage of her; and then a deeper irony is that even though the scribes were not themselves transformed by the truth they taught, the widow was.

The widow had learned a secret of the kingdom of God—that we depend not on ourselves, or what others think of us, or our wealth, but on God alone. And understanding this lesson—not just with her mind, but with her heart—is one of the greatest secrets of the kingdom of God: that as God's children we put our trust in God alone.

So where are we in this story? Certainly we know a great deal about the faith, but has it seeped into our hearts? Not that I would include myself in this company, but regularly you hear some of the best preaching and finest music in the nation. We are next door to one of the most elite institutions for theological education in the country. And yet Jesus comes to us today

reminding us that we can have all this and still not know what it means to trust God; and even further that the accolades of the world can actually deform and distract us.

I remember hearing a humorous but probing question: if you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? If Jesus were teaching his disciples and using your life as an example, what kind of example would it be?

This is the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ; blessed is anyone who is not offended by it.