

Religious but not spiritual

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on November 8, 2009, The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost.

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market place...and say long prayers. Mark 12: 38-40

Jesus realized the need to reform his Jewish faith and was particularly concerned with the hypocrisy he saw everywhere. Any religion that sets such high standards and seemingly impossible ideals is bound to fall short and its followers subject themselves to hypocrisy. When people tell me that they don't like the church because there are too many hypocrites, I want to assure them that there is always room for one more! We all fall short of the ideal of the perfection of God, but there is no point in aiming for anything less.

In today's gospel narrative, Jesus advises his followers to beware of the Scribes who like to walk around in long robes and be greeted with deference in the marketplace and expect to be given places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They give every appearance of being very religious while foreclosing on the homes of defenseless widows. There are many who claim to be "spiritual but not religious," but the Scribes were the other way around. They observed all the religious rituals but had not the slightest clue as to the spiritual nature of the religion they practiced.

They were also known for their long prayers which, instead of being addressed to God, were nothing more than an ostentatious display of their own piousness. When Bill Moyers was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, he was called on to give a blessing before a luncheon with the President and some members of congress. Half way through the prayer, the President bellowed out, "Speak up Bill, I can't hear you," to which Moyers replied, "I wasn't talking to you, Sir!"

We all want a measure of self respect, but there is no need to seek special recognition, no matter who we are or what position we hold. That is why Jesus teaches that at a dinner we should take the lower seat, lest we take the higher one and have to be asked to move down.

Humility is one of the most important marks of a Christian. I once knew someone who was so immature and narcissistic, so full of himself that everything he did was calculated to call attention to him. When I spoke to him about it he rigidly insisted that was the he was he and had no intention of changing. We are all capable of changing our behavior if we are willing to acknowledge the need for it.

In reality, humility can be neither taught nor learned, it has to come from within. Humility is characteristic of those who are secure in themselves. It is the sense that we are made worthy through our acceptance of God's grace. Saint Elizabeth Seton said that the gate of heaven is very low, only the humble can enter it. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built in the fourth century, has an entranceway that is only about four feet high. It was built that way to prevent anyone from entering on horseback. The result is that most everyone has to bow as they enter that holy place that marks the birthplace of Jesus.

The church is for our own spiritual growth and nurture and we must not use our church connections for self-gain. People who join a church to gain social prominence or make business connections are there for the wrong reasons. There are many by-products of belonging to a faith community, including fellowship and support, but self-promotion and personal gain must never

be a motivation for being part of the church. The best church leaders are those who are secure in themselves and who find fulfillment in other areas of their lives. Those who have nothing else going for them in their lives will seek prominence in the church, manipulating their power over others. It is said that the Christian reflects the image of Christ as a clean window lets in the light of the sun. The truer and more intense the light, the less we see of the glass.

Many of Jesus' teachings are based on his observation of people. He was able to discern their inner motives by observing their outward actions. In the same way an artist talks with his subjects and observes the way they sit and stand and move in order to capture their manner and personality on canvas. Years ago, I happened by the artist Normal Rockwell who was sitting unnoticed on the steps of a hotel observing people as they walked by. He was studying their movements and expressions for ideas to put down on canvas his detailed and realistic interpretation of people in everyday situations.

In the gospel narrative today, Jesus is sitting in the temple watching people place their offerings in containers marked for particular charities. He notices a poor widow who puts the smallest of coins in the collection box. Others are giving what they have left after they spend what they want on themselves. The poor widow is giving more than anyone else because she gives all she has.

In giving of ourselves to Christ, it is not how much we do; it is the complete giving of our whole selves without reservation or condition. We should not have to be coaxed and cajoled and made to feel guilty about giving ourselves sacrificially for God. It's all about imitating Christ who, as a man for others, held nothing back. This means being willing to speak out when it is easier to keep quiet. It means taking an unpopular stand for honesty and justice. When we are asked to give our whole selves to him without condition or reservation, to give anything less is to miss the whole point of being a Christian.

In the full scheme of things, we have to ask who is really poor and who is truly rich in the sight of God? We cannot begin to measure God's abundant love for us. Like the poor widow in this story, it is when we are giving our whole selves to God without reservation or condition that we realize how much more we are receiving than we are giving.