

**Beware.....
Mark 12: 38-40
Don Lincoln**

The little boy was standing in the church hallway, staring up at the large wooden plaque there on the wall, with a hundred or so little brass nameplates with names engraved on them.

The pastor came down the hallway, and seeing him coming, the little boy caught his attention and asked the pastor what all those names were on the plaque. And the pastor quietly said, "Well son – those are all the men and women from this church who died in the service."

The little boy cringed a little – got very quiet – and finally with a bit of uncertainty asked, "Was that at the 8:30 service, or the 9:45?" (It's been years since I told that one, but it still works!)

Years ago I served at First Presbyterian church in Roanoke, VA. They had big, huge wooden plaques with gold lettering in the hall for WWI and WWII service members. The living membership also happened to have a large contingent of VMI grads – Virginia Military Institute – for those of you who don't recognize the initials. A gentlemen in the congregation, a VMI grad and WWII veteran who was a good friend, told me about a trip back to VMI for alumni day.

He was seated in the crowd – and being the kind of school that it was – the alumni events always included the traditional parade of the cadets before the stands where the alums and guests were seated.

My friend said as the parading cadets on the field approached the rows of seats, one lone cadet walked near the stands just a little ahead of the flag – the colors – and whispered instructions to those in the stands. He whispered to several gentlemen in the front row – "It's customary to stand when the colors pass."

Well – if these had been visitors from outer space, those directions might've been appropriate – but he picked two alums from VMI. One of the men said, "Cadet, you have one dress parade a week. When I was here, we had five!! Oh.....by the way (motioning to the man seated next to him)– can I introduce you to Major General Anderson?"

My friend said the cadet quickly straightened up, tucked his tunic, angled his cap, clicked his heels, saluted and dropped arms sharply to his sides all in a nano-second.

My friend also said the cadet looked more like he was having a seizure than exhibiting military precision.

Even the lowly cadet wants to impress and be impressive. We all know what that is like. We all like to impress others.

So – here is this description by Jesus of scribes – teachers of the law if you will – and how they love to be known for who they are, the position they hold, the standing, respect, authority, power, success – you name it – they like it.

How they love to prance about in their long robes, with their fringe and tassels, as people bow and scrape before them in public places.¹

Last time I preached this text, I recalled ordering a new robe with a gift from this congregation upon my 10 year anniversary here and 30 years of ministry. I mentioned one pulpit robe catalog suggested an extra braided color trim along the velvet panels – “for that distinctive touch, adding height and dignity to your new robe.” I was tempted, but..... “Beware.”

“Beware of these,” Jesus says, “who always take the best seats, whether it’s in places of worship (Presbyterians like the back rows), or community celebrations, or the hottest new restaurant in town.” Because they were known and wanted to be known and people who knew them wanted it to be known that they knew them! These are the same individuals some people invited to dinner parties as “special ornaments” – and you can imagine what digestion was like at such a meal, for each time a scribe passed, it was customary to rise respectfully.

“Beware of these,” Jesus says. Beware of those who love to be greeted – “saluted” is the way James Moffatt translates it – saluted in the marketplace. “Your holiness,” “Doctore,” “O Most Esteemed One.” “The Reverend Donald Lincoln.” How they love the best seats and the best parking spaces.”

But you know what? I had forgotten, until looking at research again that there is, of all things, a scribal nuance in this text. You may or may not know that the New Testament manuscripts have no punctuation in them. Translators have to pick and choose where to put commas and periods.

In our translation there is a comma right after Jesus’ words, “Beware of the scribes.”² “Beware of the scribes, COMMA, who like to be greeted, who have best seats, who wear the long robes, blah, blah blah. As opposed to “Beware of the scribes – no comma – beware of the scribes who preen and are self-absorbed. Beware of the ones who act like that. The insinuation in that translation would be that not all of them act that way, but some DO. Beware of them. Beware of the ones who think they are better than anyone else. A simple comma makes a HUGE difference in translation.

But truth be told, you and I don't mind knowing folks like them. When they invite us to their corporate box at Lincoln Field. Most of us, at least sometimes, wish we were one of them. Most of us look longingly at those guys in dark suits just outside baggage claim at the airport holding a sign or an iPad with a name on it, and some of us can't help but glance – on the off chance that for some strange reason someone will be holding a sign with OUR name on it to whisk us to some limo for our ride home. I keep looking. (holds up sign with name "LINCOLN" on it!).

But, Jesus doesn't stop there. He says beware those who cheat widows out of their homes. This is not just about puffed up tassel wearing. This is serious stuff. These are those who not only have positions of power, and show off in public, but are those who use their positions of power to lord it over others – to abuse others; people who deal with those who are in need, who are in crisis and enslave them in human trafficking.

These are those who use their power to take advantage of others; to say long-winded prayers in the synagogue and then keep the temple tax so high that the poor widow – on her fixed income – has to give virtually all she has in order to stay right with the religious authorities and tradition, because of those in power who interpret the law this way. "Beware," Jesus says.

You know what story comes next? The one about the widow's mite. About the poor widow who puts her last two coins into the temple treasury. How many times have I preached about her generosity, in stewardship season, when perhaps, following on the heels of Jesus' words about "devouring widow's houses," Jesus is lamenting for that widow and her last coins, and for the fact there are SOME scribes so concerned with keeping their fancy robes and their place and power they would demand of a widow her very last penny – so she could remain "**right with God?**" Is that godly? "Beware of them," Jesus says.

What's clear is Jesus condemns those in place and power who have no clue or no care about servant leadership. Who don't understand His way – that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.

And so it is to be with those who follow in His way.

A couple weeks ago I was asked to give an inspirational talk to a group of Army Generals at the Army and Navy Club in Washington, D.C. I faced that opportunity with more fear and trepidation with just about anything I've done in recent history. One, two and three star generals are a little out of my wheelhouse.

So I asked a couple military officers in this congregation for some thoughts. One of them said, remind the Generals what a difference it makes when a General Officer shows up for a 6:00 a.m. morning run with the troops and the NCO's. Or when the General stops and chats – informally – with a private in the mess hall. People notice. That kind of behavior makes an amazing difference in how troops respond to an officer.

Another said encourage them to be willing to show emotion. Great joy when something good is taking place; deep sadness – even tears – when tragedy has struck. The troops need to know they're human too. If they do, they'll follow them anywhere.

Servant leadership. People in position and power who know what it is to serve, as opposed to being served. Let's face it. Someone has to be in power; someone has to be in charge; someone has to be elected to do the work of the people. Thankfully, some individuals are gifted to lead. But the call always is to serve the people, to serve the greater good.

But beware those who love the best seats; who use their station to their own advantage, rather than for the benefit of the other. Those who devour widows.....

Yesterday we celebrated the life of Sue Mills – a deacon, a Stephen minister, a confirmation CREDO leader in this congregation – who at age 53, died of a brain aneurysm. It was just a couple months ago Pastor Ann mentioned she was writing a letter of reference for Sue, and I asked what for? And she said a tenure track position at Widener. Sue has a PhD in nursing. I had no clue. Never heard anyone call her Dr. Mills. She certainly didn't insist on that. Sue chose some of the most servant-oriented roles in the life of this congregation. Servant leadership.

In the last couple weeks we've seen two prominent instances of servant leadership. Dr. Jerry Rabinowitz, the compassionate physician who died while trying to help fellow members of the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh – not some fancy, high falootin' doctor – but a physician of boundless compassion. That's what I heard from his friends, his family, his neighbors, his patients, who told that this Penn grad died doing what he always did – helping others.

The other was Sgt. Ron Helus – set to retire next year from the Ventura County Sheriff's office – whose last act of his 29 years as a hard-working, dedicated law enforcement officer would be to give his life in an attempt to stop the shooter in the Borderline Bar and Grill in Thousand Oaks, CA. **Here to serve.**

It's why I wrote in the news and events today a column on the Vision Team – who did the "reveal" of our new vision all through the month of October and most of the time – during the congregational meetings and the reveal – were out staffing tables, talking to members, and not in the sanctuary.

And not one of them said, "Don, is anyone going to thank us for the thousands of hours we put in this past year." Not a one of them! Some of them are going to continue to the work moving forward, and some of them are handing that off to the next group of people. They are not looking for awards.

Vision team members – would you stand and be recognized? This is what I love about being a pastor in this congregation. It's filled with people who get it. Who do what they do because they know they're called to serve. It's what Jesus did for us, and what He

calls us to do for others. Not to use place and power to lord it over others but actually to share the love and grace of the Lord with them and with anybody and everybody we meet.

Servant leadership. Place, power, position, election – all, truly, given so that those can be servants of the greater good. On this Veterans Day, what a great reminder for us, as we remember what our Veterans have done, and remember that we follow Jesus, the Son of Man who came not to be served, but to serve.

May it be so for all of us who follow Him. Amen.

1. Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, November 11, 2018.
2. Mark Douglas, Feasting on the Gospels, Mark 12: 38-40.