

Toward Whom?
 Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 146
 Reading from the New Testament: Mark 12:38-44

Have you noticed an uptick in the number of surveys and assessments that you are expected to fill out recently? Schedule an oil change and you'll probably be asked to take a few moments before your appointment to click your way through an assessment. *What word best describes your mood right now? A) Manic; B) Ebullient; C) Flat D) Homicidal?* Many questions seem to offer the same options for an answer: Always; Sometimes; Rarely; or Never. *People say you light up a room: Always; Sometimes; Rarely; Never?* I'm 5'7" and bald with a forgettable face and enough insecurities to fill a storage unit. So, I'd have to click - *never*. I don't light up rooms. I melt into the wallpaper.

Yet, I've known people who light up rooms regularly and with such ease. They play the role of room transformer so naturally, as if they were born to it. Their wattage is such that people are drawn to them like lunas to a porch lamp. They cross a threshold and it's as if there is a collective sigh of relief among those gathered, now convinced their attendance is not a waste. Do I envy them? I don't know, because

knowing me, I'd live with the fear of when the light goes out, but the party goes on.

The movie *Notting Hill* was on this week for those old-schoolers who still click their way through the nightly cable options. It's the improbable story of a London used bookseller and his tenuous courtship with a megawatt film actress played by Julia Roberts. At one point while discussing their vastly different worlds, she says, "One day, not long from now, my looks will go, they'll discover I can't act, and I'll become some sad, middle-aged woman who looks a bit like someone who was famous for a while."

Even LED-bulbs dim to dark eventually. You see, the trap of fame, prestige, or privilege is that you grow accustomed to it, maybe come to expect it, and in a twisted way begin to see yourself as a victim when you aren't pampered or don't receive the accoutrements of privilege.

Teaching in Jerusalem's great Temple at a time sandwiched between the vibrancy of his Galilean mission and the shadow of the cross, Jesus said, "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 honor at banquets!"

Nowhere to lay his head, functionally homeless, from a hick town, and spending most of his days slumming with sinners and tax collectors, one could be tempted to say that Jesus was just jealous. After all, the "in crowd" was giving him bad reviews and actively plotting to separate him from his own breath. However, Jesus never complained or implied that he had been deprived of anything other than a moment to himself. This wasn't some yokel slamming those uppity Jerusalem know-it-all elites. There was no bitterness in Jesus' criticism of the scribes, he was just describing the likely consequences of the unholy marriage of privilege and pride.

The scribes did not constitute a political or religious party like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots. Rather, the scribes represented the educated class. Literacy in that time was limited to a relative few. The scribes could read and write, and thus, could be equipped to serve many roles. They were lawyers, diplomats, recorders of public records, teachers, and experts in Mosaic law. We're talking pipe tobacco, wine snobbery, elbow patches on their tweed jackets, with

an affinity for opera, 12-year-old scotch, and fly-fishing. You've heard of antimatter? These dudes would be the anti-Matt. "What do you mean you don't serve Cheetos?" The scribes don't party, but eat pate, write reviews on *Tripadvisor*, lament the limited variety of cheeses at the Fresh Market, quote James Joyce, send back entrees at restaurants, and carry a catalogue full of impressive names to drop at every pause in the conversation.

They have grown to expect the finer things, choice seats at the theater, access inside the ropes at museums, night clubs, Final Fours, concerts, and movie premieres. I love my younger son's questions. Some athlete will hit a walk-off homer or drain a buzzer beater, and he'll ask, "Do you think he gets free drinks at every bar in town or ever has to pay for a meal at a restaurant?"

If adoration no longer comes as a shock but has become an addiction, when the preferential treatment and praise don't occur, the claws come out. "Do you know who I am?" "Me wait? How dare you!" "I know people." "I'll have your job for this." Well versed in red carpet techniques, they've learned to feign indifference to turned heads and camera clicks. They have come to see themselves as above it all,

unbound by the constraints of the mere human. Even the law must bow to their desire now and then. Their mission statement sounds like Sally's wish list on *A Charlie Brown Christmas*: "All I want is what I have coming to me. All I want is my fair share."

Seeing the behavior of the scribes, Jesus exposes their duplicity, the contradiction between their performative piety and their sense of entitlement. Humility is rarely revealed in arrogance. Jesus sees what the prophet Amos saw long before when he railed against Israel's leaders: "I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate ... I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs ... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Teaching in the Temple, observing the scribes, Jesus points out how little has changed: "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces ... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." Why do we offer

a prayer of confession week after week after week? Because of the dissonance between what we say is important to us and what our actions reveal is important to us. One moment the scribe is sharing a hymnal with the widow Jackson and before the benediction he's slipping out the back door and crossing the alley to the bank where he'll sign the foreclosure papers on her house. They want credit for their sanctity while covering up their sin. Publicly pious, privately parsimonious. Do you remember the line of the National Security Advisor in *The Hunt for Red October*? "I'm a politician which means I'm a cheat and a liar, and when I'm not kissing babies, I'm stealing their lollipops."

It's a failure of resonance. Do you know about resonance? In astronomy, it's the occurrence of a simple ratio between the periods of revolution of two bodies about a single primary; it's when orbiting bodies exert regular, periodic gravitational influence on each other,

In our response to God is there a resonance between word and deed, piety, and practice, promise and execution? It is a question we must regularly examine as individuals and as a community, in our relationships and as a church. Did you know that in the late 19th

Century, the most respected and influential church in New York City was at that time perhaps the city's most egregious slumlord? All the papers ran headline stories reporting on the negligence of the fabled Trinity Church at the corner of Wall Street and Broadway. One article reported that in the squalid tenements owned by Trinity, the mortality rate was 35% higher than the city's average. Word vs. deed. Piety vs. practice. Talk the talk vs. Walk the walk. Here, Jesus challenges the church, challenges us to regularly examine the resonance of our acts of worship and our lived witness, i.e., handing out bulletins or teaching the children Bible stories do not offer license to exploit our neighbors, ignore their suffering, or feel entitled to preferential treatment.

When you hear yourself say, *Do as I say and not as I do*, that's a problem. The scribes represent every time we honor God with our lips but neglect our neighbors to feed our avarice and ego.

Remember the widows whose houses are being devoured by the scribe's real estate investments? Well, providence shows it hand here as just such a widow walks up to the treasury while Jesus' audience is still shuffling their feet and staring at the floor in self-conscious embarrassment after Jesus' riff on scribal duplicity. The widow puts in

two copper coins worth nothing more than the prank of locking your college buddy in his dorm room, no longer enough to even purchase a single gumball.

Jesus isn't so much guilting us into signing a pledge card (But hey if it works...). Rather, he is highlighting fidelity. In that society, and too often in ours, the widow is disenfranchised, excluded, a non-person, and when not forgotten, easily exploited. In this instance, this widow is victimized by the very people who are glad-handing and deal-making in the church narthex. Excluded, exploited, and abandoned, the subject of derision and bad humor, she tunes it all out because nothing is going to distract her from the God who holds her close even as the world treats her as untouchable. The scribes, the in crowd can deny her many things, but they will not deny the widow her dignity in the sight of God.

Jesus notes her undistracted focus as she walks through the scribes, around the insiders with their entitlements and swag bags, the name-droppers regaling others with their celebrity contacts, their status as only three degrees removed from fame. Jesus sees dignity in the resolute way the widow presents her offering to God in spite of any institutional malfeasance or status conscious segregation going on

around her. I wonder if Jesus would think of her when he would take a similar walk through the streets of Jerusalem toward the cross. "He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account." Yet, as with the widow, that would not deter Jesus' devotion to God.

In the movie, *Unstoppable*, Denzel Washington plays the role of Frank, a train engineer for a freight company. A runaway train with no personnel is headed for disastrous derailment in a heavily populated area. He realizes his locomotive is the last best chance to avert catastrophe. If he can catch up to the runaway there may just be a chance he can stop it. His boss thinks otherwise.

Oscar Galvin: I am not jeopardizing more personnel and more property just because some engineer wants to play *hero*! End of discussion! That train is our property. It's our decision! Now you stop your pursuit or I will fire you!

Frank: *[chuckles]* Fire... You already did.

Oscar Galvin: Already did what?

Frank: You've already fired me. I received my 90-day notice in the mail... 72 days ago. Forced early retirement, half benefits.

Oscar Galvin: So, you're gonna risk your life for us with three weeks left.

Frank: Not for you. I'm not doing it for you.

For whom do we live? Toward whom is our service directed? John Calvin said it so well. "If we, then, are not our own but the Lord's, it is clear what error we must flee, and whither we must direct all the acts of our life. We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds.

"We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us forget ourselves and all that is ours.

"Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for Him and die for Him. We are God's: let His wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward Him as our only lawful goal." Amen.