



November 12, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Mark 12:38-44

“Leaping Forward; Holding Back”

When I was five, my parents enrolled me in dance classes. I enjoyed them immensely, and was filled with pride later that year when I participated in my first dance recital. I remember it vividly. We wore black tap shoes with pink spangles. Placed on the floor in front of each dancer was a bell- the kind you tap in a shop to get the salesclerk’s attention. The choreography utilized the bell. We’d jump back, sit down, jump up, then leap forward, tapping the bell with an outstretched toe. My parents complimented me profusely on my part in the performance. It wasn’t until many years later that they shared their delight in my unique way of dancing to my own music. I was completely out of step with the others in my class. When they sat down, I stood up. When they jumped up, I sat down. When they leaped forward, I jumped back. And when they jumped back, I dramatically leaped forward to tap the bell loudly with my shiny patent leather tap shoe.

I share this story because the image of life as a dance has great power for me. Life is a dance. Our relationship with God is a dance. Our relationships with one another make up a dance. Today’s reading from the gospel of Mark presents Jesus as something like the caller at an old-time country square dance. He’s hollering out which way to move, loud and clear. Have you ever participated in a square dance where most everyone is familiar with the caller and the calls? Even if you’re a newcomer, it isn’t too hard to catch on. But if most of the dancers are unfamiliar with the calls and the caller, you can get into some pretty wild tangles, right?

Let’s think about our Scripture. This reading depicts events near the end of Jesus’ earthly life. He had made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which we remember each year on Palm Sunday. The people in the city were excited, hoping he might be the Messiah, who would lead them in overthrowing the Romans. Jesus entered the temple several times, and objected to the practices of the religious authorities.

Jesus challenged the prevailing image of royalty and the awaited Messiah. He said the Messiah would be a much different kind of “Lord” than a traditional king. He knew that many of the scribes and religious leaders derived a sense of their own importance from that royal image. They saw themselves in the upper strata of the social system, worthy of greater respect and honor than the average man or woman. Jesus denounced their views. He said they had things backwards and upside down. Because they were not trying to follow God’s commands to love and serve others, they were going to receive the opposite of what they expected. They would receive greater condemnation, rather than greater honor, if they persisted in their elitist attitudes.

Jesus, the square dance caller, pointed out that these folks were leaping forward when the dance calls us to jump back. Let’s look at their leaping forward, and see what it tells us about ourselves.

They liked to walk around in flowing robes, Jesus said. What’s the problem with that? Commentator William Barclay suggests that a long robe sweeping the ground was the sign of a notable. It prevented the wearer from hurrying, or doing any physical work. It was a sign of leisure and honor, the way the pale skin of the “bluebloods” of European culture was a badge of honor, proving THEY never needed to labor under the burning sun like the PEASANTS.

Here Jesus critiqued all that would lead us to claim more leisure than our fair share. Jesus calls us to step back with the multitudes, to accept our responsibility to work for the well-being of ALL God’s creation. This includes chores around our homes, as well as things like recycling, volunteering in our church and community, voting for candidates who we believe will look out for God’s world and his people. This also includes working for pay, and prayerfully sharing that money with others in the ways God directs us.

Jesus pointed to the folly of “leaping forward” out of a desire for prominence in public, in religious gatherings, and in social settings. This includes high school, the workplace, the neighborhood and even church. Christ knows we are pulled towards wanting that kind of prominence. We’re none of us exempt- we love it when we get speaking parts in Christmas musicals, when we are asked to sing solos and play instruments in worship. Preachers are just as bad- we want to be the one to preach the “big” services- Christmas, Easter and so forth. I know some of you are saying, “I wouldn’t be caught dead doing any of those things in front of a bunch of people.” I’m sure that’s true- but ALL OF US reach for special treatment of some kind.

Even worse than this cultivation of appearances is the misuse of the power we possess. Scribes not only acted stuck up, they took advantage of people who were vulnerable. Scribes had legal training that led them to handle matters of inheritance and transfer of estates. They could and did use their position for personal profit at the

expense of widows, for example. The temptation to “leap forward” for material gain at the expense of others runs deep in the human soul.

Leaping forward in self-promotion is familiar to all of us. It makes the dance of life difficult. We crash into each other; we hurt each other. We need to listen to Jesus, our caller, who often says “Move back; hold back.”

Next in our Scripture, Jesus commented on the poor widow’s gift to the temple treasury. This reading gives us two contrasting examples of leaping forward. The scribes leaped forward for personal glory and benefit; the widow leaped forward in generosity and sacrifice. It’s not always wrong to leap forward. The poor widow, who gave all she had, points out the kind of “leaping forward” Jesus calls us to do. This leaping joins us together in the dance of life, making room for all to spin and weave in joy, without hurting others dancing with us.

William Barclay points out three aspects of the widow’s gift.

First, giving must be sacrificial. He says, “For many of us it is a real question if ever our giving to God’s work is any sacrifice at all. Few people will do without their pleasures to give a little more to the work of God. (Today)...gifts have to be coaxed out of church people, and often they will not give at all unless they get something back in the way of entertainment or goods.” We need to face Jesus’ challenge of our ways.

Second, Barclay points out the widow’s giving has a certain recklessness in it. It’s hard to trust God that much, isn’t it? It’s hard not to hold back just a little--- and I’m not talking about just financial giving, but the way we live our lives, the way we dance the dance. We always hold back, just a little, don’t we?

The third point Barclay raises is that the person Jesus has handed down in history as a great giver gave less than a penny in today’s currency. This challenges us to change our ways of evaluating what we have to offer. “My gifts are so puny,” we may think. “They couldn’t possibly make any difference in the whole picture- the needs of the world are so great.” This gives us permission to hold back. Friends, our church has 43 member households who do not give monetary gifts to the church. If each of those households gave just \$20 per week, (the cost of a McDonald’s meal for a family of four) we would have over \$45,000 additional dollars for our ministries each year. There really is “no gift too small”. Jesus says, “Put all you have at God’s disposal; God can do things with it, and with us, that are beyond our imagining.”

I want to issue a challenge for us: Make a sacrifice of some kind this week. This does not have to be a financial sacrifice. Time, attention, praise, words of appreciation- these are other gifts we can offer. **NO GIFT IS TOO SMALL.**

An illustration:

There's a poignant story told by a writer from an earlier century. Upon his father's death, the son was asked to go through his father's personal papers. The writer reported finding his father's journal which had been kept when the son was small. Delighted, he looked for a particular date he treasured in his memory. When he was a young boy his father had uncharacteristically spent an entire day with his son. They had walked into the woods to a nearby stream and spent hours in quiet companionship while fishing. Finding the entry, the son was startled to see only two terse lines:

Went fishing with Will.

A day wasted.

No gift is too small. What seems small may have immense value and consequences. We need to learn to trust Jesus, to become generous with our time, our attention, our friendship, our love, our money, our praise and positive words. We need to listen to him as he calls out the steps we're to take day by day.

The stories from Mark have convinced me we're all a bit like five year olds in a dance recital. We leap forward when we're supposed to step back, and we hold back when we're supposed to leap forward. But you know, I continued to take dance classes through high school and into college. I learned to move in harmony with the music and my companions. That's what we're here for today, friends. This is dance class. We are practicing. We listen to the music. We move with each other. We listen for the calls of Jesus to help us know where to move next. May God's own Spirit lead the dance, and may we learn and practice day by day.