

## Elephants in the Room - Mark 12 38 - 44

Newtonbrook United Church - Nov. 8, 2009

Is there a story in the Bible that has had an important effect upon your life - and your ministry?

There are two stories from the Gospel According to Mark is one that have affected my life and ministry. They have been important because they have raised some important questions for me as a Christian; questions about whether I am ignoring the elephants in the rooms of my life. If you think like me, and I am sure that I do, maybe there are elephants in some of the rooms of your life too.

Do you know what is meant by the phrase, "there's an elephant in the room"? (*Usually - something big and obvious that we don't talk about.*)

The first story that Joy read this morning began with Jesus saying, "Watch out"<sup>1</sup>

"Watch out for the religion scholars." Jesus said. Then he went on to describe how we can recognize those folks - "They love to walk around in academic gowns."

In another version<sup>2</sup> of the text it is written:

***"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long flowing robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets!"***<sup>3</sup>

There is a similar rendition of this story in the Gospel According to Luke.

Jesus is observing what any of us would have seen: the "RELIGIOUS", elaborately dressed in their ornamental robes, deliberately setting them apart from the common people.

I admit that I've had my time of walking around in long flowing robes. You have seen me dressed in a white alb and a stole. I have been the minister in congregations that expect their minister to dress in that manner all the time. I think that this story from Jesus has something very important to say about that type of symbolism.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:38

<sup>2</sup> NRSV

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:38,39

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In the United Church of Canada, as in most protestant denominations, there are two functions that our communities of faith authorize for ordered clergy only.

Who knows what you have authorized your minister of Word & Sacrament to do that lay persons are not authorized to do?

*(preside at the sacraments - baptism & communion).*

That's when I will be wearing the robe and the stole. The rest of the time when I am performing functions that anyone else is authorized to do - sing, pray, preach, visit, and so on I will be dressed as you are.

A person can be a minister without a long robe and an expensive variety of stoles. We are in ministry together as the people of Christ in this place.

The name of this elephant is clericalism<sup>4</sup>. That's when people believe that the minister is someone different than they are and clergy get set up on a pedestal.

That's one reason why I appreciate the statement that this Christian community makes at the top of your weekly Order of Service - "**Ministers - the congregation.**" It is a recognition that we are all in ministry together.

For me, reading this story has meant that I've recognized, again, who I am in the story and my need to change.

I believe that Jesus meant that we are all to share the LOVE that God has put into our hearts, regardless of whether we're wearing elaborate, ornamental robes. One of the things that is so encouraging about Newtonbrook is that people here do take that injunction seriously. In Jesus words, you love your neighbours in the manner in which you would want to be loved!

\* \* \*

Jesus noticed the widow. Here's another elephant in the room. The name of this elephant is EGO E-G-O, EGO.

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<sup>4</sup> An excellent discussion of clericalism and anticlericalism is found in Bob Sitze's book, Not Trying Too Hard, pages 157 - 177.

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Jesus noticed that many rich people put large sums into the treasury. In our society today we still have people who donate large sums and receive the recognition of having their names on buildings, etc.

When I visited Queen's University two weeks ago I was amazed at how many buildings now are named in honour of benefactors. Unlike the widow though, few of the affluent donate all that they have accumulated. Eugene Peterson's notes that in contrast to the widow, "*All the others gave what they'll never miss.*"<sup>5</sup>

The elephant in the room has to do with where God is in our lives - do we put God first, or do we give to God what is left over after we have met both our needs and our wants?

Stewardship specialist Hilbert J. Berger was once surprised by the adverse reaction that he received when he prayed an offertory prayer that said;

*"O Lord, no matter what we say  
or what we do,  
here is what we think of you."*<sup>6</sup>

I was forced to deal with the question about tithing when I was a student. Between my first and second years at Emmanuel College I was assigned to a pastoral charge for the summer. How much was I to put on the offering plate each week?

I had not planned on attending theology school, so I had no savings to finance year two of seminary, let alone year three.

My salary in the summer of 1990 was \$1,000 a month. I had come to believe in the spiritual truth of tithing - that is returning the first 10% of one's income to the church for the work of God. BUT, ....

Finally I decided to make the plunge. For the first few weeks, donating \$25 per week was difficult. All I could think of was my need. I would only be earning \$4,000 that year and here I was giving \$25 per week to the church! However, IF I was to be one who believed in and attempted to live up to Biblical truths, I would have to set my EGO aside, and live the spiritual laws.

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<sup>5</sup> Eugene Peterson, The Message, Mark 12:44

<sup>6</sup> Hilbert J. Berger, Now, Concerning the Offering, page 15

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By the end of the summer I was very pleased to be able to write that cheque for \$25 per week, out of my monthly income of \$1,000. I had learned the JOY of giving, and that lesson has sustained me ever since.

There is real joy and comfort in the soul that can be gained through sharing what we have, rather than responding to the elephant-sized wants of our EGO.

By the way, EGO is a acronym for:

E - edging

G - God

O - out

Edging God out.

The name of this elephant is EGO. Are we putting God first as the widow in the story did, or are we edging God out of the financial picture in our lives?

Two weeks ago when I was on education leave I learned something that Michael Blair spoke about last week - our need as the United Church to incorporate new ways into our worship services.

I learned that at St. Matthew's United here in Toronto, near the intersection of St. Clair and Bathurst, they no longer take up an offering. Instead, they have changed their worship to incorporate an African custom at the time of offering.

What happens at St. Matthews is that the congregation is invited to leave their pews; come forward; and make their offering to God, and the church.

Imagine the symbolic power of this ritual. It fits with the story of a poor widow's extreme generosity. Would we be willing to do that here at Newtonbrook?

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Another elephant is not in today's scripture readings - but it is in the words of Jesus.

As followers of Jesus we are instructed not only to:

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"love your neighbour as yourself"<sup>7</sup> but we are also to:  
"love your enemies"<sup>8</sup>

- What can this mean at a time when we are participating in a war in Afghanistan?
- We know exactly how many of our people have died in that war, but we don't know how many of our sisters and brothers, who are also God's children living in Afghanistan, have died, and what their names are?

Is the elephant in the room the fact that we have allowed our Government to go to war for the sake of our security?

OR, is the elephant in the room the fact that we have simply accepted war as a fact of life?

OR, do we really believe that the violence of war can bring peace?

OR, is it that the elephant in the room the fact that we know that Jesus was an advocate of non-violent resistance - of turning the other cheek,<sup>9</sup> and our Christian churches of Canada rarely challenge the political elites of this nation to bring about peace through non-violent means.

What if each of these candles here at the front of this sanctuary were to represent one, or more, innocent Afghan children who have been killed as a result of being born in Afghanistan, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time?

These are children who, in the words of a very popular rock song ;  
will never go to school; never fall in love;

I may not know the names of the elephants in the room, but this I do know: the gospel of Jesus is about the power of love - a power that overcomes evil in all of its insidious forms. That love is here with us today, and wherever we travel for we are not alone - God is always with us.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 12: 31

<sup>8</sup> Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:44

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 5:39, Luke 6: 29

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I know that Jesus confronted the powers of violence that crucified him - he responded to the violence of the Empire in a non-violent way.

Margot Kassmann has written that if the churches really want peace in God's world, they,

*"Will have to give up being spectators of violence or merely lamenting it and become active within and outside the walls of the church."<sup>10</sup>*

Jesus showed us a way to live. We have those stories in the scriptures. We all know that these stories are a challenge to us for we are all human - whether we wear long flowing robes or whether we are poor widows with barely two coins to rub together.

The vision of a world that ought to be is revealed in the stories of Jesus. It is a world that can be - a world of peace, of generosity and of justice. It is a world that God dreams is possible and we are invited to be an active part of that dream.

#682 - O Day of Peace

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<sup>10</sup> M. Kaasmann, "Overcoming Violence: The Challenge to Churches in All Places", page 68