“Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes…”
Gulp.
I must admit that this passage gives me pause.
It is an exceedingly awkward passage to preach upon, and not just because of the implied dress code.
You might think that the stewardship committee in this, and every church of the land, would welcome this passage. After all, it sounds like Jesus is saying give all your money to the church.
And, yes, we do need your financial pledges and today is a good day to turn them in.
But that isn’t really what this passage is about. In fact, several biblical commentators point out that the meaning could be quite the opposite.
So, let’s unpack this a little.
This passage in Mark’s gospel is embedded in the story of Jesus’s conflict with the Temple authorities in Jerusalem.
In the time of Jesus, who is Jewish, the locus of Judaism was the Temple, this massive structure built by King Solomon.
The base of the temple was ten stories high and it covered three football fields. On top of this gargantuan base were a series of courtyards and buildings leading to the inner sanctum where only the high priest could go.
The temple was built of stone, cedar and olive wood, and the walls covered in gold. It was truly one of the wonders of the ancient world.
In the courtyards, priests would daily sacrifice animals and keep the best meat for themselves. They would burn the carcasses, so you might imagine that the stench was often overpowering.
Devout Jews were required to make regular pilgrimages to the Temple and bring an unblemished animal for sacrifice.
An unblemished animal had no physical defects, so it would be an expensive animal. The idea was that the animal would be sacrificed to atone for the sins of the people, and the smoke would waft upward to heaven to please God.
Since most people lived in the countryside, bringing an animal to the temple could be a challenge.
So, people would purchase an animal for sacrifice when they arrived at the Temple. That was the purpose of the notorious moneychangers, by the way.
To Jesus, this was all just a big scam, and he knew of what he spoke. He was clearly familiar with the ways of the Temple.

The gospel of Luke tells us he had gone there as a young child, and was so entranced by The Temple he didn’t want to leave, and his parents couldn’t find him. He had probably hid himself away in the temple.

As an adult, his profession was “carpenter,” but in the ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts, the word for his profession is “tekton,” which is both a woodworker and a stone mason – a craftsman.

Jesus might well have worked on the Temple as craftsman, learning every nook and cranny – and probably watching the ways of the priests. He saw a lot.

So back to the Gospel of Mark.

In the passage just before the one we hear today, Jesus confronts with the temple priests, arguing they have made God’s house of prayer into a “den of robbers” (Mark 11:17).

He also takes a verbal jab at the temple priests in parable labeling them as as hypocrites. Not surprisingly, this enrages priests.

And then we come to the poor woman putting her last two copper coins into the coffers of the Temple.

Jesus points out that the temple priests are exploiting her: “They devour widows’ houses, and for the sake of appearance say long prayers,”

And here is the final dig. In the very next passage, which we don’t hear this morning, Jesus predicts that the Temple will be destroyed, which in fact happened.

The Romans demolished and burned the Temple in about 70 AD. All that is now left of the Temple is the massive base with its famous “Wailing Wall.”

Put all of that together, and we could hear this passage today as Jesus is saying the poor woman is giving to a lost cause and the priests are taking advantage of her.

So, what do we do with this?

First, Jesus is not advocating the destruction of the Temple. But he is outraged that the priests are using this most sacred place to fleece the poor out of every last copper penny.

He calls for the Temple to be true to its mission: Worshipping God and serving God’s people.

Therein is a hard lesson for us as the Church. Jesus is not against institutional religion, but he is warning us that the institution is worthless if it has forgotten its sacred mission: Worship God and serve God’s people.

I would be remiss today in not telling you how this institution – this Episcopal Church – is deeply immersed in our sacred mission during these fires we are now enduring.
Our church in Chico is involved in the evacuations in Butte County. Episcopal Relief and Development, our church’s international arm in times of disaster, is on the ground. And please keep all of those who have lost so much in your prayers.

Please also know that this smoke here in Sacramento is triggering trauma in many who survived other recent fires, me included. I evacuated during the North Bay fires last October, and many of the families in my parish lost their homes.

I also learned then what it truly means to be a diocese. So many from near and far came to our aid, and we learned what it means to be the Body of Christ.

We are learning this again today.

But there is something even deeper for us in this gospel passage today beyond critiquing institutions.

Jesus tells his disciples that the poor woman’s two coins are worth more than what those who give just for appearances.

She gives from her heart.

She is all-in, trusting in God’s grace and mercy, and trusting that sooner or later, the institution will recover its mission and find its soul.

She gives out of trust that God at work not only in her, but at work in the Temple. Yes, God is in her, God is in the Temple, and God is even in this church, even with all its flaws.

Her copper coins represent her life and her hope of things promised and not yet seen. Her copper coin represents her faith.

She is all-in.

I come back to something I said a few weeks ago: Think of every copper coin – and every dollar – you spend as a prayer.

What is it that you pray for by how you spend your money?

And what is it that we pray for together by how we share our money through our giving, and not just to this church, but in our giving in the world around us?

What does our giving say about us? Do we give out of hate and fear, or out of love and hope? What is our prayer?

And if every moment of our life is a prayer, what is it we pray for by how we spend our time? What is it we are all-in for by what we do, what we say, how we act? Do we act out of hate and fear, or out of love and hope?

The poor widow gives all she has, not out of her material poverty but from the richness of her soul.

She fears nothing, and hopes for everything. And she marks her path in life with her generosity, in the hope of things promised but not yet seen.

She is all-in. Are we? AMEN