

November 8, 2009  
Lectionary 32b  
Mark 12:38-44  
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

### ***I WISH IT WERE THAT SIMPLE***

I wish it were that simple. Put more money in the offering plate. Be like the widow in today's gospel. Put everything in. Empty your wallets. Throw in your credit cards.

The unnamed widow is usually held up as an example of selfless generosity. She gives her all. She puts in everything she has, everything she has to live on. A couple small coins worth a penny. Haven't you heard plenty of sermons telling us we should be more like her? That we should sacrifice? That we should give our all?

I wish it were that simple. Just verses before we get a picture of an offertory procession. People are all walking by the temple treasury, dropping in their offerings. And rich people are putting in a lot.  
(Sounds pretty good to me!)

Jesus is watching it all. After all, he's not just spiritual, he's religious. He practices his faith and attends services. Maybe even hears hypocritical, boring sermons! I wonder if it's stewardship Saturday or a special capital campaign to improve the temple building.

Or whether you can receive a mug with the temple logo on it if you make a really big contribution.

But there's a big problem going on. The institution has forgotten what is at the heart of their religion: care for the widow, care for the stranger, care for the orphan. The religious professionals like the prestige of their position. But it seems like the offerings are mostly supporting their luxurious lifestyle!

And could it be any more ironic? The widow is giving everything to an institution that is supposed to be caring for her and isn't.

Is Jesus praising the widow's generosity? Or is he lamenting the injustice of it all? And what does it mean for us? I wish it were more simple. As we struggle with our commitments, with the way we live our lives, with the way we spend our money. I wish it were more simple. As we argue about healthcare, the role of government, and who's supposed to care for the most vulnerable among us. Unfortunately, what matters most is usually how it will affect me, not people in need.

I want to stop the widow before she puts in her offering. I want to tell that she needs those coins to live on.

I wonder what makes her so generous. I wonder what makes anyone generous instead of selfish. Is it being thankful for what you have? Why is it that people with less are often more grateful than those of us with so much?

In a day when folks want to be spiritual but not religious, but still occasionally want what churches have to offer, sometimes it's tough to be a branch manager for one of those religious institutions. Mainline denominations like the ELCA are cutting staff. There is less loyalty and financial commitment than there was a couple generations ago. How will we keep our church doors open? The churches that are growing are the ones that tell people exactly what is expected of them. On the other hand, we don't want to turn people off. We know all the damage the institution has done. So what will motivate us to grow in faith and commitment?

In this week's *Newsweek*, the editor questions whether recycling a few coke cans will really make any difference in the grand scheme of things. He admits that some people are motivated by the spiritual theme of being stewards of the earth. But usually money trumps God. Or in these blunt words: "Human beings only change their behavior when danger is imminent or when there is money at stake."

The widow puts everything in. What does she think she is doing? Who does she think will take care of her? Is her offering a sign of her trust?

Verses later (next week's gospel) Jesus will take about the end and temple walls that will come tumbling down. A few days later, as Mark tells story, Jesus will give his all, offer his very life, for the sake of a greedy, misguided world.

Today we as a congregation make commitments for the coming year. Your generosity enables us to be a community that is both spiritual and religious, welcoming and faithful. Yet living simply is about more than money. It's about the ways we care for the earth ... the decisions we make regarding eating, exercising, and resting ... and how to choose to use the gift of time. To encourage one another on this path of simplicity, today we step back and look at what we value most in our lives.

November sure gets our attention. The earth is dying. The days getting shorter. Nothing lasts forever.

While at the dentist on Thursday, I mentioned to the hygienist that I had had an important birthday—you know one that starts with “f,” ends in “y” but not the one with “o” in the middle. She asked me how I was doing with that. I said that someone reminded me to consider the alternative.

A couple moments later the hygienist told me that her forty-five year old sister had dropped dead a year ago. She was healthy, but dealing with stress. Supposedly her heart valves were worn out. One day she was fine, having dinner with their mother, the next day gone.

When you hear a story like that, it sure keeps everything in perspective. And sure simplifies things.