

November 14, 2018
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 12:38-44

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He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

Background:

It will be helpful to remember the gospel text from three weeks back, when James and John came to Jesus and asked that they be granted the seats on Jesus' right and left when he comes into glory. (Mark 10:35-45) Jesus' instruction to his disciples was "... whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first will be slave of all." (Mark 10:43) Mark's description of the scribes here is the total opposite of Jesus' instruction and his own way of living among them. The scribes do not identify with the poor servant class or even the common people of the day. They seek positions among the elite. Jesus makes no attempt to hide his criticism, and it is likely that the scribes themselves would have overheard his remarks.

Widows were among the lowest members of society. The word itself in Hebrew carries a meaning of one who is silent, unable to speak. That is because all women were expected to remain within the interior of the house while men of the day occupied the public arena. The concerns of a woman were expressed by her father or husband. If a woman became a widow and had no married son who could take her into his home, she would return to the house of her father or brother. If none of those were possible, she was forced to beg. Widows had no status of their own. Due to these circumstances, the care of widows became one of the basic values of Hebrew society.

The second part of the gospel text for today is linked to the first by the word widow. By putting the two texts next to each other, Mark emphasized the self-indulgent behavior of the scribes. To support the temple treasury, thirteen trumpet-shaped chests were placed in the courtyard. When coins were placed into these, the sounds of the coins could be heard by others. Donations of large coins made significant noise as they fell to the bottom. The coin that the widow used was the smallest in use at the time, its value was about 1/64 of the daily wage of a laborer. By including the detail that she placed two coins into the treasury, Mark makes sure his audience is aware that her intention was to hold nothing back, not even one of her small coins.

Jesus' comments about her gift are not words of praise, but rather they carry a tone of lament. The widow, like the other people of the day, has been taught by the scribes the value of sacrificial giving. The temple offerings are designated to be used for the care of the needy. But there is a hidden presumption that these scribes have been using some of the funds to enhance their own appearance.

Truly the widow has given all that she had to live on, demonstrating her total trust in God to take care of her. Her gift will not enhance her status or reputation, like the large gifts of the others will do for them. The widow's gift is a gift of herself, her very life in service to God. In reality it will not affect anyone else but her. While the widow may have great trust in God, the larger situation of the religious leadership of the day is troubling Jesus.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are some of the reasons people choose to give to charities, churches, and individuals? What are some of the reasons you choose to make donations?
2. Who are the people without a voice in your community?
3. When you consider the daily life of the poor in your community, you think of...
4. Who are the faces of compassion in your community?
5. Mark's description of the scribes as men who wear long robes, accept greetings, and seek out places of honor brings to mind...
6. Place yourself with Jesus and his disciples at the temple in Jerusalem as people are gathering. There are trumpet shaped treasuries into which people are placing their offerings as they pass. As you imagine yourself there, what do you imagine the scene to be like? What do you notice in your mind?
7. Can you take some time to talk with God about your awareness of yourself as you reflected on this gospel text? What would you like to say to God? How does God want to respond to you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for November 11, 2018, the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

In those days, Elijah the prophet went to Zarephath. As he arrived at the entrance of the city, a widow was gathering sticks there; he called to her, "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink." She left to get it, and he called out after her, "Please bring along a bit of bread." She answered, "As the Lord lives, I have nothing baked; there is only a handful of flour in my jar and a little oil in my jug. Just now I was collecting a couple of sticks, to go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid. Go and do as you propose. But first make me a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the Lord, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'" She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the Lord had foretold through Elijah.

Praise the Lord, my soul! The Lord keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets captives free and gives sight to the blind.

The Lord raises up those who were bowed down; the Lord loves the just and protects strangers.
The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts.
The Lord shall reign forever; your God, O Zion, through all generations. Alleluia.

Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one,
but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf.
Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters
each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own;
if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world.
But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.
Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, so also Christ,
offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time,
not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.

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in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues,
and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext
recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation."
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Excerpts from 1 Kings 17:10-16; Psalm 146:7-10; Hebrews 9:24-28; and Mark 12:38-44