

Year B Proper 32 Your Life, Whole Life, and Nothing But Your Life Mark 12 vv38 to 44

It may be tempting to think that this passage is simply encouraging us to give money towards the fulfillment of God's purpose by giving money to the church. We *are* meant to do this but that isn't what this passage is about. Samuel Cruz, Professor at Union Theological Seminary, tells us, "What was taking place in this passage was an unmasking of the oppressive dominant discourse of that time and has relevance for unmasking that of our time" (workingpreacher.org).

So what does that mean? It is important for us to know that this story today comes at the end of a narrative whole that began when Jesus triumphantly entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the adoring praise of the crowd. He went into the Temple and, since then, we've heard story after story that highlights the corruption of the Jewish leaders and of their beloved institution of the Temple.

Jesus has been showing us that the Temple – meant to be the saving help of the poor, the sick, the vulnerable of society – has, itself, actually become a hotbed of inequality, exclusionary behaviour, and greed. The consumerist and power-driven ways of the world are now reflected in the practices of the Temple which was meant to be the dwelling place of God, the place where God's perfect kingdom could be found and could be spread throughout the rest of the world.

It's leaders, too, have been corrupted by the power of the world. Jesus gives us a scathing picture of the leaders – meant to be the shepherds of their people – who, instead, are hypocrites, *looking* very God-loving in their long robes and *sounding* very God-loving with their long prayers when, in reality, it is not love of God but love of human praise and wealth that they crave. "They devour widows' houses,"

we are told. Our English translation disconnects the devouring of the houses from the long prayers of the scribes but the original Greek does not. What Jesus actually says is that the scribes take the widows' homes and, as their excuse (*prophasei*), they pray to God. They claim they are doing it for God. The Jewish leaders are amassing wealth as, all the while, they use giving to God as their excuse for doing so.

As Jesus puts on display for us the corruption of leaders and institution, we need to realize that this is not unique. This is not something that happened 'way back then' and doesn't happen now. The behaviour of the scribes and pharisees that Jesus blasts for its wrongness – for its love of worldly power – is behaviour common among the rich and powerful of our society. Perhaps most disturbing is that we empower this behaviour. How so?

When we have nice stuff, when we have plenty of food to eat, when we have a home, do we not declare that we have been blessed by God? How about when you hear of a person who's struggling, who's lost everything...have you ever said, "There by the grace of God go I"? Does that mean God is kind to us and not kind to the people experiencing troubles? Are poor people not blessed by God? You may say, "Of course not." But, when we continuously make use of popular statements and sayings, that is exactly the type of thinking we cement in our minds. Without consciously trying to, we believe that having wealth and power, according to the world's way of seeing it, is a good thing. I would bet that every one of you would be able to give me the name of a billionaire but how many of you would be able to tell me the winner of this year's Nobel Peace Prize? (Nihon Hidankyo) We admire the wealthy and the powerful. We see this in the way we

treat celebrities. They are treated as if they have knowledge to impart to us simply because of their status. That is why it's such a big deal to get big name endorsements when you're a politician. When we see a beautiful young woman marry a much older man, we don't say, "Wow, he must be a great person." We say, "Wow, he must be rich" because we *know* wealth and power attract. In general, society absolutely judges by outward appearances and buys into the world's idea of success.

In a closing scene in the movie *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone – very rich, very powerful mob boss, is standing at the church font, the godfather for his infant niece at her baptism. During this four-minute scene, we hear the baptismal rite in the church but the video track switches back and forth from the scene in the church to scenes of hit men under Corleone's command preparing to murder several rivals. The murders themselves coincide exactly with Corleone's renunciation of Satan and all his works. Melodramatic for sure, but precisely the hypocrisy suggested by Jesus: "They devour widows' houses and for an excuse they say long prayers." (story found on [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org))

Jesus sees through the sham exterior of words and deeds done not for the glory of God but for personal glory. Jesus sees straight to the heart. The motivation for all that we say and do is clear to God even when it is not obvious to others and maybe not even obvious to ourselves.

As we learn this valuable – perhaps disturbing – lesson from Jesus, that is when the widow enters the scene. For starters, *if* the Jewish leaders were actually following God's ways and *if* the Temple was functioning according to God's ways, then we would not have a widow putting her last two coins into their treasury. We

wouldn't have today's story because this widow's needs would be taken care of. Even as we watch this woman put those two small coins into the treasury, we must acknowledge that the very leaders and institution that have called her to this faithfulness are themselves broken and corrupted. They have succumbed to the world's ways of thinking. They have turned from God's ways, unable to resist the lure of the greed and glamour of the world.

This isn't a story about one scribe fallen from the glory of God. Jesus is confronting the beliefs and values of society that are enabling the oppression and injustice that results in the poverty-stricken widow of our story, the beliefs and values of society that propel institutions and organizations *away* from helping others into the selfish and self-centred mode of "God helps those who help themselves." We absolutely live in a society where this is very much the current situation. The reason that we live in a world where "power corrupts" is because we live in a world that so very highly values what worldly power offers. Even the church is not immune. I've been in congregations where the person with the biggest donation also believes he should have the biggest say. The privileging of wealthy in the church started a long time ago. The seats in a church used to be purchased by families so that, when the family attended worship they had a specific place where they sat because they'd paid for it. The richer you were, the better the seat you could buy, much like being able to buy seats behind the players' bench at a hockey game versus being in the "nosebleed" section needing to watch the big screen tv to see what's going on.

Throughout Mark's Gospel – and all of the Gospels – Jesus tells us and shows us, in no uncertain terms, that the world's attraction to wealth and status leads only

to brokenness and must be rejected. It is rejected and replaced with God's ways of radical welcome and abundant generosity leading to equality, true peace, and enough for everyone. Perhaps you remember the quotation I shared with you last week: "The poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order" (Gustavo Gutierrez). The sad reality is that people in power don't want a different social order because that means letting go of what they have accumulated. We, too, often hesitate to push too hard for a new way of being. We have a lot to lose and maybe we can't even picture how things could be different. It feels impossible to have a world where there is zero poverty, zero crime, zero conflict...What is impossible for us, is not impossible for God. We must trust that God is drawing all things toward the intended perfection and, just as importantly, we must live into that perfection in the present. That is exactly where Jesus leaves us today.

The poverty-stricken widow, failed by the leaders and institution that should have helped her, still gives to God her last two coins. She has hope and she has trust that God will do what God has promised to do and she lives that hope and trust. Jesus upholds this hope and trust as he proclaims that she has given her life (*bion*), her present state of existence. She has given her *life*, are the words Jesus speaks. God's kingdom will not fail to come on earth as in heaven. God will not fail to keep his promises. Amid the reality of broken leaders and broken institutions, let us have hope and trust and, like the widow, let us give our life to God.