

Sermon for Proper 27, Year B
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
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In our Gospel reading today, Jesus teaches about the scribes, the teachers of the law. These personages, he says, “like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts”. In the culture of the day, the longer someone’s robe the more important that someone was. The more important a person was, the longer the robe and the slower they walked. These scribes that Jesus describes just like being important. They like being treated as better than others. They “devour widow’s houses”. That is, they take advantage of those who have less in order to make themselves richer and even more important and to keep up the opulent lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. They make long prayers, pretending to be pious and keeping up appearances.

The scribes aren’t really committed to God and the service of God’s law. They are in it for the status, the money, and the power. To adapt a quote, they ask not what they can do for their God, but what their God can do for them. It’s not that they have bad theology. It’s that they have bad priorities. They are takers rather than givers. They have not committed everything to God, even though they are teachers of the law and know that that is what God requires. And Jesus says that they will be condemned for this.

Then Jesus sits down and watches the people bringing their offerings of money to the temple. There were in the temple thirteen boxes in the shape of trumpets. They were receptacles for cash offerings, and the money would have been collected from these boxes and taken to the place where all the funds of the temple were kept. So people are processing to one of these boxes and putting in their offerings, Jesus observes and comments. Notice that they didn’t have bank notes and checks. They had coins. When we process up to bring our offerings, it’s still a mostly secret process. We have envelopes and bills and checks, so no one can see how much we are putting in the plate. But with silver and gold coins it’s more difficult to be secret. It sort of has to be done in front of God and everyone.

So lots of people put in large sums of money, and then this poor widow comes and puts in two *lepta*, which make a *quadrans*, which our translators call a penny. It was a miserable amount to give. This penny wasn’t as valueless as one of our pennies is today, but it was still worth far less than an hour’s wage. It’s like one of us putting a single dollar bill in the plate. It’s nothing. It won’t pay our power bill for a minute.

But that's not what is important to Jesus. Jesus doesn't comment on the *amounts* of money that people put in. It's not the amount that he actually cares about. He only comments on the attitudes made apparent in the giving. And here we have some reason for the connection between this and the teaching on the scribes. The attitudes and priorities of the people is what Jesus considers the most important thing going on.

Jesus praises the poor widow, because she gave everything she had. She prioritized her giving to the temple. And in so doing, she gave herself to God without reservation. She depended on God to take care of her. Where the scribes ask what God can do for them, this widow who has nothing only asks what she has to give to God. How much it was she had to give wasn't the point. The point was that she gave it. Actually, she gave more than all those other people who had given out of what they had left over.

Nowhere does God say that all our money should be given to the temple. He does say that everything we have actually belongs to him. And we should dispose of what we have in the way he asks us to. What he actually commands is that we give a tithe, ten percent of our income, whether that income is in bushels of wheat or dollars, whether we make that income from our land or from our investments. We owe God everything, but he asks us to at least give him ten percent back, as a measure of faithfulness. And he says that, if we are not doing at least that much, we are stealing from him.

Once again, it is a matter of priorities. Do we give our ten percent right up front and then figure out how to spend the rest? Or do we give out of our surplus, out of our left-overs? Do we give out of our substance, or, as Jesus would put it, do we give merely out of our abundance? Do we take care of ourselves first, or do we give back to God first. This particular difference of priorities marks the dividing line between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. It's not the whole distinction, but it's a strong component.

Do we, like the poor widow, give more than we can quote-unquote afford, trusting God to supply our needs? Or do we hoard our wealth, giving back to God only what we determine we can do without, or only what will manipulate God to give us what we want? The answer to that question will determine the destiny of this parish and every parish. Not because faithful giving will give us enough to succeed, but because the faithfulness itself will grow like a mustard seed, producing life and light and joy in our loving relationship with Jesus Christ.