

A lot of commentaries suggest that today's gospel is a good occasion to talk about stewardship, about how generous you are in giving back to God who gave you everything. I am not going to do that because mostly I think it's a lost cause. The truth is that Catholics are the lowest of all the major religions in supporting their church. Lots of Catholics are more generous to waiters than to God. They give at least 10% as a tip and for great service even up to 20% of their bill. That is double the 10% that scripture says we owe God. They would be embarrassed and afraid to give to waiters what they give to God.

You are probably thinking: but maybe there are reasons why we don't give as much, we do other things, we give to other causes. All of those are true but still the bottom line is that the average Catholic – the one between the really generous and the really stingy – will give the church a bit less than 2% of their income each year. That's been the figure for a couple decades now and probably won't change that much in the near future, so we will talk about something else today.

I think the first thing we need to notice today is that the story of the generous widow has a context and Jesus wasn't primarily talking about money or tithing either. He starts off warning people about the scribes. For simplicity I told my religion class at Churchtown to think of scribes as lawyers but scribes don't even come close to being as honorable and decent as lawyers. They weren't a religious group like Pharisees who emphasized keeping laws or the Sadducees who emphasized temple worship or the Essences who lived apart from others sort of like the Amish. Scribes were simply people who could read and write. But in a culture where very few had those skills this brought them a lot of respect – and a lot of opportunity to cheat, and manipulate and belittle people.

When you needed someone to take write out a message or a contract or a deed you had to use a scribe but you never really knew if they wrote what you said. When you needed someone to read those things or interpret documents you would go to a scribe but you never really knew if what they said was actually what the paper said. For a little bribe a scribe could make a document favor one person over another. For their own purposes they could read official decrees to favor their own interests. Being able to read and write made them powerful people. The average person had to turn to them even though you didn't really trust them.

Because they were essential to the operation of society, they could demand all sorts of perks: special robes to set them apart; honorary titles; places of honor at banquets – and you didn't dare not invite them; they even got special seats in the house of God. Probably the most damning of all that Jesus had to say about them was that “they devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers.”

In Jewish society the group least powerful and most to be pitied were widows. A woman depended on her father or husband for protection and support – a widow had no one. They were easy to take advantage of. Taking what little they had or people might give them was an easy con game for the scribes. For example Jewish law proscribed special prayers for the dead that needed to be said at certain intervals after a person's death. An illiterate widow couldn't do that, but a scribe would gladly say some prayers for her - if she could come up with their price. If the Jews had a dictionary, under the word “sleazy” there would have been a picture of a scribe.

Jesus main message in today's gospel was a condemnation of a group of people who were focused on power, personal honor, wealth, and even willing to use their religion to manipulate the most helpless members of their society. The contrast he makes with the widow is even sharper now. She has no power, no wealth, and no status. Yet in those circumstances the one thing she chooses to cling to is her faith - in God and his promises. Her faith says that even in her dire situation she needs to support the temple and she doesn't complain or look for a loophole or just excuse herself as too needy. She follows her faith as the most important thing she can do with the little she has. Because she values her relationship with God above all else, Jesus hold her up as the model for others to admire and follow.

Jesus wasn't commenting on the fairness of the temple tax or demanding that others give away all they have, but he was insisting that, in putting God first, she got it right when others made their relationship with God just another item on a checklist of things they had deal with or to at least minimally acknowledge. Most of us aren't the cold, manipulating jerks represented by the scribes AND most of us aren't the beacons of selfless devotion to God that we see in the widow but still the message was aimed at us. The gospel today wasn't really about money; it was about power: who has it and how they use it.

The scribes craved power, mostly in the form of wealth and a forced show of respect. They thought they could just keep accumulating more of it at others expense. They wanted to be better than others. Needless to say, they weren't really respected – they were despised – and in the end they had simply worked their wholes lives to separate themselves from God, the only really lasting treasure, the only power that can make us more than we are and better than we could ever achieve on our own.

The widow chose to let herself be powerless and rely on God. She earned the respect of Jesus and the promise of a life that could never lose what was most treasured.

So I don't think that this story was ever intended as an opportunity to ask you to give more money, but it is an opportunity to recommend that you give God what that widow did – everything.