

Two widows. Both poor. One was starving, the other we know little about except what Jesus said. He said that when she went into the Temple to worship God, she put in two coins, a tiny offering by anyone’s standards but God’s, because God knew that she was giving everything she had.

Gospel-writer Mark’s account of this widow’s radical offering has always made me uncomfortable. Why and how did this woman let go of both coins and not hold onto one to buy bread? Did she know the story from 1 Kings about the widow of Zerephath and how God provided for her and her son, and thus believe that God would provide for her needs as well? Her action gives me trouble because I was brought up to do everything in moderation. Give to the church what you can afford. Trust God, but don’t become a fanatic. If you invest, be sure to put your “eggs” in several “baskets.” Moderation.

Through the years, though, I have learned that “moderation” when it comes to God is disappointing, because it usually means that *I* try to be in charge, that I try to manage my relationship with God.... “I will worship you here, God, and read the Bible for 20 minutes, and give a tithe...” Stop! Let’s face it: the Bible makes it extremely clear that *GOD* is the one in charge; we are not! In fact, the whole Bible wants us to see that God loves us so much that God has chosen to be with us in our every breath and beyond. No matter how badly we treat God, **NOTHING** can separate us from the love of God. (Romans 8) God has showed us very clearly by giving us Jesus that God is anything **BUT** a “moderate” God! God loves us radically and forever!

Today’s lesson from Mark’s gospel marks the end of Jesus’ public ministry. It tells us that our giving is important to God. And at the same time, it shows us that in Jesus God has given everything, as the widow did. Our challenge is to watch our own living and giving and realize that they have a lot to do with how we are daring (or not daring) to trust God’s giving.

A crisis hits... A child - no matter how old - needs something we cannot provide. We cannot fix his/her situation, we cannot alleviate his/her pain, we cannot restore the balance to his/her outlook on life. Moderation is not what is needed here! **GOD** is needed. The real, living, healing, challenging, life-giving God.

A soldier finds himself or herself in the midst of war. In Afghanistan, it’s hard to tell who will turn out to be your enemy. The pressure is total and the tension unending. Family worries and prays. The soldier lives each day, trying to be strong for fellow soldiers, and trying to stay alive, but with the knowledge that any day could force the ultimate sacrifice. “Moderation” doesn’t work in war. God seems more and more important.

A lump turns into a nightmare that continues into the daytime... Life faces the dreaded challenge, and suddenly all the plans, all the goals, all the dreams shrink, mocked by the need for scans and chemo and protocols. Suddenly the truth that life as we know it does not last forever grips... There is anger, fear, chaos... Moderation doesn’t get us very far, but the God who is Lord of Life and Lord beyond death *can*!

The widow put her entire trust in God. No ten percent tithe, no careful assessment of “What I can afford.” She put it all in, perhaps because she understood what few of us really do: Apart from God, we have nothing for very long.

Jesus, by drawing attention to her faithfulness, showed that God notices every time we make even the smallest step forward in our faithfulness. In the Gospel lesson, Jesus would die that week. He went to the Temple and stayed in the Treasury, watching folks come in to give their offerings. He saw some pretty impressive "stuff," no doubt. But then he saw something nobody else noticed: the widow with her tiny offering. We don't know her name. The Treasurer surely didn't call out and say, "We want to thank Mrs. So and so for her generous gift to our temple fund." In fact, in the scriptures there is no suggestion that *Jesus* even spoke a word to the woman. He didn't change her life, or help her win some money somewhere. But he told of her incredible contribution, and we continue to be challenged and directed by it today. **Think about it: Jesus was about to offer everything on the Cross; maybe that's why this poor woman giving everything she had meant so much to him.**

This story challenges our use of our money, but it's way bigger than money. Perhaps even more challenging than putting money in an offering plate is reaching out to another person with love that extends beyond moderation. Love, that is, in the way of Christ: to lift up someone who has stumbled in life; to give hope to someone who is despairing; to forgive somebody who needs to be forgiven.... This is making an offering of the very fabric of our daily lives...It is trusting that God is really God, and that what we do for his sake will make a difference in somebody else's life and also in OUR lives, even when we don't see any difference. That's faith, faith that leads us to live beyond “moderation” and that opens the doors to our hearts so that we can participate in God's kingdom NOW.

Now I want to tell you about another widow, Martha, a member of my first church in New Haven in 1980. By the time I met her, Martha was basically shut-in. She was a different sort of person; I knew this immediately when she shuffled to her door and threw it open. She stared into my face with her piercing blue eyes, and said, "So you're the new pastor. Hmmm. You don't look like any minister I've ever seen before, but I'm glad you came. Come in."

This started my relationship with Martha. This woman hadn't been to church in years; in fact NONE of the old-timers could place her at all, but her name was on the rolls... She was unusual. She lived in what one could call a shack, but with maybe three rooms. It was heated by portable heaters, and parts of it were covered with plastic. Bedspreads hung in various places to keep down drafts. Martha had trouble moving around, for arthritis had crippled her pretty badly, and she had all sorts of other problems. She kept her house dark, using only one small light at a time, because she didn't dare run up her electricity bill.

She could stare a hole through a person, and she just about did with me. She hadn't had many years of school, her grammar wasn't so great, but she was extremely perceptive and quite good at expressing herself. She had only a couple of teeth, but she kept herself and her little dwelling very clean.

I visited this woman regularly. I had to: If I didn't, she'd call me and demand why I hadn't visited her. More than anything else, she wanted to receive communion. Serving holy communion to persons who could not get to church was important to me. With Martha, it became an adventure! She was HUNGRY for Holy Communion, not just for the grape juice and the bread morsels, but for the entire thing! I had a little booklet with the new-at-the-time Methodist communion service printed in it. It had parts for the clergy to read, and parts printed for the congregation to read. Martha took that booklet and made it all her own. We read the confession, and the assurance of God's forgiveness, and all of the prayer of consecration, together. It was hers, and through her it became holy in a new way for me. Her eyes were not strong, but her heart memorized the entire service as time went by.

I think of Martha whenever I hear today's gospel lesson. She didn't have much money or much of anything. Her husband had had a lot of problems and had died early. Martha had managed to raise her children by cleaning other people's houses. She didn't have much to live on, or much to give the church, either. She couldn't attend, and wouldn't, anyway, because she had no clothes left other than loose house-dresses... She sat at home with her pet cat and celebrated the times when her far-away children made it to Connecticut to show her their children. One day, when I was heading over to visit this woman, my church's financial secretary, who received the money members gave, snorted, "Her? Why do waste your time seeing her? She can't help this church!"

But she DID help that church, in ways nobody could know. In her own strange way, she ministered to the church's minister. She became the officiant at the little communion table in her shack, and she pronounced God's forgiveness and the love of Jesus. She gobbled down those bits of juice and bread in an innocent, open, needy, and confident way that somehow let the meal BE God's gift. Her contributions may not be recorded anywhere at that church, but they were special and very powerful. She was humble and expectant at the same time. God had helped her in life, and she wanted to help God.

The first Thanksgiving I knew her, Martha called me on the telephone in her blunt manner and said, "Florence, you have to come over here and get my stuff." I had no idea what she was talking about, and it was a particularly inconvenient time for me, but I obeyed. Her "stuff" was a bag full of cans and boxes of food. It was her contribution for hungry people for Thanksgiving. She told me to pick up the stuff, and then said, "I give this to thank God for the people who brought food to me years ago so my family could have Thanksgiving. If they hadn't brought me stuff, we wouldn't have had anything to eat. I can never forget, and I can never NOT give my stuff at Thanksgiving now." (pause) "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had" (Mark 12:43-44)

Stories of widows. Stories of faith. Nothing moderate about any of them. And best of all, there is nothing moderate about God's love for you and me. Jesus did not measure out what he would give; he gave himself completely, in order that we might have life and a never-ending relationship with the God who for some reason love us.

Years ago I heard in a sermon that a sailor was going off to war. He told his parents, "If word

should come to you that I have been lost at sea, do not despair, for even in death I will remain safe in the hands of God.” (Source unknown)

We never know what any day will produce in terms of challenges, opportunities, and blessings. But God does, and God is always with us. May our faith and our living be so beyond moderation that we discover in our days the possibilities that only God can see. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Our hymn is “Hymn of Promise,” #707.