

Whenever I read the Gospel we've just heard, I find myself recalling a story about the Rev. Gordon Cosby, who for 60 years was pastor of a remarkable interdenominational Christian fellowship, the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C. The incident occurred when Cosby was a young man, minister of a small Baptist congregation in a railroad town just outside of Lynchburg, Virginia. As Cosby tells it:

"My deacon sent for me one day and told me that he wanted my help. 'We have in our congregation,' he said, 'a widow with six children. I have looked at the records and discovered that she is offering the church \$4.00 a week – which has to be a tithe of her income. [Let me just pause here to note that, in today's dollars, that \$4.00 is worth at least \$40 – maybe more.] Of course, she is unable to do this. We want you to go and talk to her and let her know that she needs to feel no obligation whatsoever, and free her from the responsibility.

"I am not wise now [writes Cosby]; I was less wise then. I went and told her of the concern of the deacons. I told her as graciously and as supportively as I know how that she was relieved of the responsibility of giving. As I talked with her tears came into her eyes. 'I want to tell you,' she said, 'that you are taking away the last thing that gives my life dignity and meaning.'

"I tried to retrieve the situation. I was unable to do it. I went home and pondered the story of Jesus in the temple watching the people put their offerings in the collection plate. Jesus' attitude amazed me. He had the audacity to watch what people were putting in the collection plate. Not only did he have the audacity to watch, he had the audacity to comment. Of the rich who put in large sums he said, 'They put in what they can easily afford.' Of the poor widow who dropped in two coins, he said, 'She in her poverty, who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living.' I knew [had I been Jesus] I would have said to her, 'Let us take this to the council. We have a sensible council that always makes exceptions and I know that they will relieve you of your discipline of giving.'"

*from Letters To Scattered Pilgrims,
by Elizabeth O'Conner*

Someone has said, “you cannot read the Word of God.” The key to the word of God may be in that Bible you hold in your hands, but the Word of God itself is found in what you *do* with that Bible message. You’ve got to know the Word of God, and “know” in the language of the Bible means “to love and enter into.” So it is only when we love and enter into a life of generosity, a disciplined life of giving, that the Word of God can come alive in us.

And what that Word teaches is simply this: Life is a gift. Life is a gift from God intended to be unwrapped and enjoyed and celebrated. Life is a gift to love and enter into. When I look at that woman in Gordon Cosby’s story – or when I look at the widow who gave her “mite” I see a deep and wonderful invitation. God invites us to use all we’ve got – whatever it is, no matter how big or how small – to unwrap the gift. If we hold back, if we let anyone stop us from unwrapping it, as with the woman in Cosby’s story, we lose what gives our life dignity and meaning.

Unfortunately, all too often for all too many of us, we get stuck in the windowless basement of fear, locked inside ourselves behind bars that tell us we somehow don’t have what it takes to be that kind of generous giver. We think we’re inadequate – and so we close ourselves off to the possibility of feeling the wonder of God’s gift. And the result? We can’t experience the joy of God’s gift of life in all of its abundance. We just end up feeling stuck. Often it has been going on for so long that we don’t even notice. It’s just the way life has always been. We don’t even look for more.

The widows in these two stories have something significant to share with us. They bring us closer to the Word of God because they love and enter into a discipline of giving. They show us a way to be free from our fear, to be free from the bondage and idolatry of money. They show us a path, a way into a life lived with the Word of God.

Notice that, in our Gospel, Jesus watches, not in judgment. He merely observes and reports what he observes. He wants us to live a faithful life of dignity and meaning. And he says that the widow shows us one important dimension of such a faithful life. Think for a moment about the two copper coins the woman drops in the plate. Once they entered the collection to be used for the ministry and mission of God’s people, those two tiny copper coins took on the proportion of the entire Temple treasury. They became a part of a much larger sum and could do such work as they could never have accomplished by themselves.

Those two coins represented, we are told, the whole proportion of what the widow had at that time and place, and she placed them before God to do whatever work needed to be done in God's name then and there. Then they took on the whole proportion of the entire Temple treasury.

Jesus asks all disciples everywhere, in every age, to remember her gift, not for its size, but for its proportionality. And to remember her faithful exercise when we exercise our own discipline of giving. It's not the size of the gift that counts – it's the fact that it represents a sacrifice. An offering that isn't easy, rather than what we can readily afford out of the leftovers in our lives. She gave "off the top," and so are we called to give "off the top," the first proportion, or what the Bible calls, "the first fruits of our labors."

Jesus spent his whole life and ministry trying to offer people another way to approach their living. He recognized that it was possible to live in full and open awareness of the loving presence of God, because God was all around us and within us in every moment. All we need to do is become aware of it the way these two women became aware of it. But that isn't going to happen if our living and our giving are not intimately related to our relationship with the living God.

The woman in Gordon Cosby's story "gets" that. So, it seems, does the widow in today's Gospel. But what about you? Do we live our whole lives locked up in the basement of fear, closed off to feeling the wonder of God? Or do we come out into the sunshine and let God's Spirit shine through us? If these two women teach us anything, it is this: Be full! Give with joyous abandon! Jesus wants us to never forget that we can know the Word of God the same way the widow knew the Word of God. We can love and live into the joy and dignity and meaning she derived from loving and living into the Word of God. I suggest to you, there's no better time to begin than right now. What are we waiting for?