

November 8, 2009
Pentecost 23, Proper 27, Year B
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Anne Tyler is a popular novelist. Some of her novels have become TV movies, but Anne Tyler is a serious novelist and has won the Pulitzer Prize. One of the themes of her 1991 novel *Saint Maybe* reflects on the nature of heroism, true greatness. Ian Bedloe, a lonely teenager, blames himself for the death of his brother Danny, and also for the subsequent death of Lucy, Danny's wife. Danny and Lucy had three children. Guilt-stricken Ian believes that he has to give his life to support and care for the orphans. He drops out of college and becomes a carpenter.

Rev. Emmett, pastor at the shabby storefront Church of the Second Chance, inspired Ian's decision. When Ian tells his parents of his dramatic decision, he explains that the Church of the Second Chance will help him care for the children when he's doing carpentry.

Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" his father asked.

No, I haven't," Ian said. "I have merely discovered a church that makes sense to me, the same as Dober Street Presbyterian makes sense to you and Mom."

"Dober Street didn't ask us to abandon our educations," his mother told him. "Of course we have nothing against religion; we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life."

"Well, maybe it should have," Ian said.

His parents looked at each other.

His mother said, "I don't believe this. I do not believe it. No matter how long I've been a mother, it seems my children can still come up with something new and unexpected to do to me."

I understand how Ian's mom might feel that way, but it may not be all about her. Ian may have a point. What is the role of a church in our lives? Is it to affirm our values, attitudes, behavior, the way we live our lives? Or, is it to challenge our values, attitudes, and behavior? Should a church justify our entire way of life or encourage us to abandon our entire way of life? When James and John left their fishing nets and their father Zebedee to follow Jesus, perhaps Zebedee wondered whether his children had fallen into some kind of sect.¹

We read and hear enough about the outrageous and destructive behavior of some sects to know that Christianity can be practiced in unhealthy, anti-social ways, fearful and combative toward the world. But on the other hand, some churches essentially embrace the norms of the world, expecting little of their people, offering little different and renewing, having little transformative impact in the lives of their people. If we're going to follow Jesus, we have to be open to stiff challenges to our values, attitudes, and behavior.

In today's gospel, Jesus challenged his culture's sense of piety and greatness. He began by denouncing the proud and greedy scribes, and then he commended the humble and generous widow. In ancient Israel, scribes were professional religious authorities, literate officials who handled legal documents as well as other civic responsibilities. They enjoyed honor and prestige.

Jesus fiercely criticized the scribes because their desire for influence, recognition, and riches not only damaged their own relationship to God, but also subverted the purposes of God and oppressed the poor and weak. They were wolves dressed in sheep's clothing – ravenously consuming those they were supposed to serve. To those whom much is given, much is expected, and Jesus rebuked the scribes for their corruption and hypocrisy.

Instead, he pointed to the humble, poor, overlooked widow as an exemplar of true piety. The widow's generosity testified to her trust of God. It testified to a transformed life. It testified to the sincerity, the integrity, the authenticity of her worship of God.

Some of the rich made large gifts to the Temple treasury. Like most of us, they gave out of their abundance. They retained much wealth. The widow made a nominally small gift, but it was huge to her. She gave all that she had, her entire living. The world trumpets the big, ostentatious gifts – the new wing on the hospital, the new school, the new foundation, but overlooks the great sacrifices of the humble. Jesus gave us a new standard. The most important thing is not how much we give, but what proportion do we give back.

That's why our annual pledge campaign encourages growth in proportional giving. We figure out our income and give a percentage back, and we try to increase that percentage to at least ten percent. Again, the focus is what proportion do we give back, not how much we give.

The widow's offering of her entire living had happened a couple days after Palm Sunday, days before Jesus will give his life. Shortly before Palm Sunday, James and John had begged Jesus to give them positions of honor and glory when he established his Kingdom, and when the other disciples heard about this, they got upset that James and John might get more than they did. The disciples fought among themselves about who

was the greatest, who would get the most. The story of the widow reminds us that true greatness comes not from what we receive, but from what we give back.

Everyone, everyone overlooked the widow's generosity, except Jesus. Every one of us knows what it's like to feel under-appreciated, knows at least a bit of anger and sorrow that we haven't received sufficient recognition or honor. We all know what it's like to do a good deed that goes unnoticed, unappreciated. The injustice. The frustration. The story of the widow reminds us that world rarely recognizes and celebrates true greatness. But the good news is that God sees it and acknowledges it.

We might also recognize that the reward of giving is not recognition. Studies consistently show that those who are generous are more happy; more likely to see the glass as half full, not half empty; more certain of their lives as having meaning and experiencing fulfillment.² When we're aware of our blessings, appreciate the abundance we've received from God, then we're more likely to be generous, to behave heroically.

Everything, everything is a gift from God. What we count as ours is not ours and is not something we deserve. Everything is gift. That's what the widow represents, and her gift foreshadows Jesus gift of himself on the cross, a gift he gives to everyone – to the widow, to his disciples, to the scribes.

In this scene, Jesus challenges our ideas and conventions about generosity, about what's true greatness, about authentic piety, and there's one other point to notice. Jesus is watching people put money into the Temple treasury. Would you like it if you had someone watching how much you gave, and then commenting upon it? Would you like someone looking through your check book, credit card bills, or online banking records and noticing what you do with money? We like to keep our finances close to our chest. Jesus' behavior may strike us as audacious, even impudent.

Jesus was not at all averse to conflict. He was always wading into it – asking uncomfortable questions, offering criticism, challenging motivations, exposing weaknesses, observing what we prefer to overlook. Most of us prefer to avoid conflict, to ignore, to deny it. We often balk at confronting differing opinions or offensive behavior, preferring to “get along.” We may even consider conflict as sinful, as a failure, instead of an inevitable and healthy part of life. Love is only real if it can be honest about conflict and endure differences.

Jesus shows us that conflict is an opportunity for stronger relationships, that conflict is an opportunity for learning and growth, but there has to be honesty, openness, humility, and charity. Today's gospel, set in the Temple, marks the end of Jesus' public ministry. During the immediate preceding chapters, his detractors – the Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, the chief priests and the scribes – have all questioned him, trying

to entrap him. When they failed to trip him up, they chose to stop engaging him, and instead to act under the cover of darkness.

Jesus had fierce words for those who opposed him. In today's gospel, scribes are among his audience. He stated his views directly to them, but they didn't answer him. They and the others who took issue with Jesus cowardly complained and plotted behind his back. They felt threatened by Jesus and couldn't be honest and open in their opposition to him. A few verses before today's passage, Mark tells us that Jesus' opponents no longer dared to ask him any questions. For them, the only solution was to end all relations with Jesus. The only solution they saw was a complete break – death. They turned from Jesus, but Jesus didn't turn away from them.

In these final days of Jesus' life, we see in Jesus another way to deal with conflict, a way not of this world. We see that we don't have to agree to love, to honor relationship. Jesus didn't agree with his opponents. Sometimes he disagreed with his disciples. But he loved them and gave his life for them, for all of them. It shows us that when there are differences, we put them on the table, speak directly about them, engage with one another, honor the relationship. We stay in the fire. That's giving of ourselves. True greatness is making a gift of ourselves.

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¹ Anthony B. Robinson, *Changing the Conversation*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2008), pp. 63-64, quotes Tyler's novel and poses the dichotomy between churches that ask for no change and those with more extreme expectations.

² Peter Singer, 'The Science Behind Our Generosity,' *Newsweek*, March 9, 2009, p. 48.