

What God Really Wants
 Mark 12: 38-44
 November 8, 2009
 First Federated Church
 Peoria, Illinois
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A Sunday School teacher once asked a class of 10 year olds if they would give a million dollars to missionaries.

“Yeeeeesssss!” they all screamed.

“Would you give a thousand dollars?”

Again the kids shouted “Yeeeeesssss!”

“How about a hundred dollars?”

“Yes, we would” they all agreed.

“Would you give just a dollar to the missionaries?” he asked.

All of the children exclaimed “Yes” just as before; all that is except for little Charlie.

“Charlie,” the teacher said as she noticed the boy clutching his pocket. “Why didn’t you say ‘Yes’ this time?”

“Well,” he stammered. “I *have* a dollar!”

Today’s gospel lesson is familiar to many of you. You may have heard a lot of sermons about it, especially at this time of the year. Many women’s groups around the world honor the widow in the story with what is called “The Least Coin” offering. I’ve seen it here in our Mothers’ Club group.

What you may not know, though, is that the lesson is not really about money. It is about something else entirely. It is about “trust;” trusting God.

This is a “bookend” text. By that I mean that it goes with a lesson that we had several weeks ago; about a rich man who came to Jesus with a question.

“Good Rabbi, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” Now that question has always struck me as an odd question. He didn’t ask “What must I do to *earn* eternal life?” He asked how to *inherit* it. By definition an *inheritance* is a gift. It’s like the old story of “grits.”

The traveler stopped in a little greasy spoon restaurant for breakfast while on his way to Atlanta. He looked the sign board and thought that the special of the day looked pretty good; three eggs, bacon, a pancake, toast, jelly and syrup. He ordered his eggs over-easy and sipped on his coffee while he waited for breakfast. The waitress brought his plate and sat it before him. He looked at it and looked back to her. “Excuse me, Miss” he said, “but I think that there has been a mistake.” She looked at the order ticket and said, “No. No mistake. There’s your three eggs over-easy, there’s your bacon, your pancake, your toast and your jelly. No mistake.”

“Yes, but,” he said pointing to this white glob on his plate next to his eggs. “What’s this?” “Oh, those are grits, Honey.” “But I didn’t order grits.” “Sugar, *no one* orders grits. They just come!”

That’s like grace. You can’t order God’s grace. It just comes!

At some level I think that the rich ruler knew that he had asked the wrong question. You don't *earn* eternal life. It's grace. Like grits it just comes.

Well, do you remember how Jesus responded to his question? "You know the commandments. Keep them."

"Oh but I have," the rich man replied. "I've kept them since I was a boy. I was raised in a *good* family."

Jesus looked at him and *loved* him. "There is just one thing that you lack; go and sell what you have, give it to the poor and follow me."

With that, the man's countenance fell for he had a great many possessions. In what was a fateful decision, he walked away. It saddened Jesus to see him walk away but he didn't chase after him saying, "Oh, I didn't mean it." No, Jesus let him walk away and said to his disciples, wistfully, "It is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

The disciples were astounded. "Who then can be saved," the disciples asked. "With people," Jesus said, "it is impossible; but with God all things are possible."

In Africa, the Zulus prize the meat of the ring-tailed monkey but the ring-tailed monkey is a very clever animal and hard to catch. The Zulus, though, discovered that there is one thing that the ring-tailed monkey cannot resist: melons. So they set a trap with melon as the bait. They cut a hole in the side of the melon large enough for the ring-tailed monkey to put his hand in but too small for him to pull his fist out. As the ring-tailed monkey struggles with the melon, unwilling to let go of the juicy pulp inside, the Zulus approach the ring-tailed monkey and kill him.

We can hang on too tightly to the wrong things and die spiritually. Jesus is essentially saying that there are no backpacks in heaven.

The rich man who came to Jesus thought that his security lay in what he had. He was like person that the Psalmist wrote about in our Call to Worship: "Some people trust in chariots and some in horses." That is not the source of security, though, real security. That is found in the next line of our Call to Worship; "But we trust in the name of the LORD our God."

Now contrast this experience with today's lesson. Jesus is sitting across from the Temple with his disciples. They are watching people coming and going. Over there he saw people of affluence in flowing robes. Some were praying loudly and eloquently. Others were being led into the Temple with horns making a big show of their alms. Jesus pointed to them and said to his disciples, "Be careful of people like that. They put on a show so people will think that they are so pious. Underneath all of the piety, though, there's nothing there." Or, as they would say in Texas, "they're all hat and no cattle."

And then, unnoticed by anyone else, except Jesus, there is this widow quietly slipping into the Temple without fanfare. She takes two coins out of her robe and drops them into the collection base.

"Did you see that?" Jesus asked. "That woman over there. She gave more than all of the others." The disciples craned their necks trying to get a good look at the woman. Jesus had to be kidding, right?! Seeing their skepticism Jesus continued. Pointing to the ones who attracted the most attention Jesus said, "They gave out of their abundance. They may have given more--in terms of dollars and cents--but what they

gave doesn't make one bit of a difference in their lives. That woman, though, gave out of her poverty. She gave everything she had."

I am reminded of a story that I once read about a boy in London who went to church one evening to hear a missionary speak about his work in India. The boy was captivated by the missionary's stories of hardship and triumph. He was deeply moved. Toward the end of the evening the pastor said that they would now take up a free will offering to help the missionary in his work.

As the plates were passed the child searched his pockets and discovered that he had nothing except a few pieces of lint. As the collection plate came to him he had nothing to put in it so he took the plate and put it on the floor beside him. He stepped into the plate and said, "All that I have to give is myself."

Isn't that what God really wants?