

The Mystery Worshipper

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: Mark 12:38-44

Some time ago Pat called to my attention the website “shipoffools.com.” It has a feature called “the mystery worshipper,” in which assigned reviewers visit churches for worship on Sunday mornings, and then write anonymous reviews of their experience in those churches. It’s kind of a Yelp for churches. These reviews all answer the same basic questions: “What is the size of the church and how full was it when you visited? Were you welcomed? Was your pew (or your chair) comfortable? How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere? What was the music like? What was the style of worship—was it ‘stiff upper lip’ or ‘happy clappy?’ How long was the sermon, and how would you rate it on a scale of one to ten? When you stood around looking lost after worship, did someone direct you to the coffee hour? How was the coffee? What in the service reminded you of heaven, and what reminded you of the other place? At the conclusion of your experience in this church, were you glad to be a Christian?”

I glanced through the list of churches visited in the past eight or nine years, and checked out the reviews of those I myself had visited during the time in

my life when my job took me to a variety of churches. The reviews were, for the most part, not unkind, although they were occasionally snarky about things like the quality of the organ or the heft of the hymnal or that irritating guy the reviewer sat next to who kept jiggling his leg throughout the service. The reviewers were usually merciful to the preachers, even the ones whose theology they didn't agree with. But each church in the eyes of the outsider has its quirks, things that seem perfectly normal to those who attend regularly but may strike a visitor, particularly one from a different denominational tradition, as somewhat strange or at least unusual in either a good or bad way.

While they weren't exactly mystery worshippers, in our September Unity Service we had visitors who, quite frankly, made me a little nervous. They were former colleagues of mine from our days in Cleveland, and I was nervous about what they would think of my sermon. What they told me afterwards, unprompted, was both perceptive and sweet. What most struck them about our worship service, wasn't the sermon—surprise, surprise—but two things that happened during worship. The first was the candle lighting, when Tom and Iland carried the light into our chancel. My friends were struck, and moved, by the symbolism of the very young and the not-as-young together opening our worship by bringing the light into our midst. And, at the conclusion, they were also touched by the circles we formed during our sung benediction, “Let there be peace.” We do these things every Sunday, but it took outsiders to remind me of the powerful symbolism of what happens here every Sunday.

In today's Gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus is in the Temple in Jerusalem, the sacred center of the Jewish faith. He probably wouldn't have qualified as a "mystery worshipper" because his entry into the city of Jerusalem had been pretty spectacular, what with the people in the crowd throwing clothes and branches on the street in front of him and shouting their hosannas as he paraded into town riding on a donkey. And, according to Mark, he had already been in the temple twice: once just to look around, and then, the next morning, he had returned and created quite a stir when he overturned the tables of the money-changers, setting off a small riot in the process. This last little stunt had angered the religious authorities so much that when they heard about it, "they began to look for a way to kill him."

And then, as if he hadn't done enough by trying to deprive the religious establishment of a lucrative source of income through the sale of sacrificial animals, he had attacked the very legitimacy of the clergy. "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in their long robes, who love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, those strutting peacocks who occupy the best seats at banquets," he said. "These hypocrites devour widows' houses and then they say long prayers to impress people. They'll get their just reward."

But if he wasn't exactly a "mystery worshipper" in the Temple, Jesus watched what was going on there with the critical eye of an outsider. He sat by the temple's Treasury, where people made their contributions to what we would call "the work of the church." Only there were no anonymous little envelopes into which people could discreetly slip their offering checks; in fact there were no checks, or even paper money. We have a saying that

money talks. In Jesus' time, money made noise; it clanged; it was all coins. It was as if the entire offering was our Melody of Compassion. So from the number of clangs and the resonance produced by the weight and the particular metal of the coins, you could pretty much estimate how much people were contributing to the cause. Contributors didn't announce the amount of their contribution, but from the sound made by the coins as they were plunked into the pot, you could tell.

So there were the wealthy people who dropped their heavy silver coins, one by one, into the receptacle. They presumably made a show of their generosity. "Thunk, thunk, thunk." I remember attending the annual banquet of the Armenian Missionary Association of America, one of our partner mission agencies, in which something like this took place. The head of the organization, a late dear friend of mine who knew human nature very well, began the business session by pointing out that a particular member had made a generous pledge of \$100,000 toward mission work in Armenia. Later in the meeting, and I think this was planned, another member rose and said that after consulting with his family, they had decided to contribute \$500,000. By the conclusion of the session, there were commitments of over \$3 million, all of them announced and duly tallied. These gifts weren't anonymous. That would have defeated the purpose of the whole exercise. People wanted their large gifts, and their ability to give large gifts, to be known, both out of personal pride and as an incentive for other people to give.

Something like that was going on in the Temple as Jesus watched. People were trying to impress one another with both their wealth and their

generosity. “Thunk, thunk, thunk.” Until a widow came along who dropped her two little copper pennies into the pot. “Plink, plink.” “Did you see that?” Jesus asked. “Did you see that? She gave everything she had while the others gave what they’ll never miss.”

Here’s where the value of the insight of Jesus, the mystery worshipper, comes in. Jesus was bringing a completely different perspective to what must have been a commonplace scenario in the temple. It probably happened all the time, so it seemed quite normal. It’s kind of like what I used to discuss with people who were getting married. I asked them to talk about their families, because, like it or not, our families are always with us. I don’t just mean the mother-in-law who takes up residence the couple’s home, or the children they may have inherited from a previous marriage. What I asked them to think about was their experience of family and how that experience may have shaped their own expectations of family life. We learn how to be family from our own family experience, and sometimes what seems normal to us may seem odd to others. If we lived in a dysfunctional family, that dysfunction might be imported into the new family that’s coming into being.

Jesus was observing what seemed to him to be the peculiar and downright distorted practices of the temple, and he was observing them from the perspective of his own understanding of the fundamentals of the faith. That perspective told him that in the scene that had unfolded before him and his disciples, the only person who was behaving with total faithfulness was the widow. The others were participating in a kind of ritual drama: giving from what they could spare, but never giving from what they themselves thought they needed. The widow was giving everything she had, while she was

confessing her dependence on God for what she needed. Widows in Jesus' time were the most vulnerable people in society. There was no security net—no Social Security or Medicare -- and there were no inheritance rights when the husband died. Widows were totally dependent on the charity of others. And if you've ever been dependent on charity, you know what a discouraging and disempowering situation that can be.

But let me reassure you. This isn't another stewardship sermon. (I only do one of those a year, and most of you heard it.) In praising the widow, Jesus was saying that it isn't the quantity of your giving that matters; it's the quality of your giving. And the quality of your giving will reflect how you view the world and how you understand God's relationship to the world and your relationship to God. Last week, in our call to worship, we used words from the 24th Psalm, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it." Many of us will remember the more familiar rendering of the Psalm from the King James Version, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Behind the words of this Psalm, which surely Jesus would have known by heart, is the fundamental assumption that we human beings don't actually own anything. We don't own our houses, our property, our bank accounts, our cars, our vacation homes. The only thing we actually own in some sense is our own lives. The rest is given to us by God to manage. That's why in the church we don't talk about "donation campaigns," we talk about stewardship, which is the management of something that's been entrusted to us, and money and property and things aren't all that is entrusted to us, by any means. We have time, talents, our energy in caring for others to manage and to give.

In contrasting the behavior of the rich people and their lavish gifts with the modest gift of the widow, Jesus was praising the widow's stewardship of the meager resources she had at her disposal. In her dependence, the widow knew, knew at the very core of her being, that she was dependent, dependent on others and dependent on God. Her sense of dependence enabled her to be more generous, more thankful, than those who lived with the illusion that they really owned the wealth that had been entrusted to them. If we don't learn that from scripture, we learn it from death, which reminds us of our fundamental equality. "You can't take it with you," is a far more accurate statement than, "the one with the most toys at the end wins." Actually the one with the most toys at the end dies, just like everyone else. As my pastor in New York, William Sloane Coffin loved to say, "Winning the rat race only means that you were the best rat."

The widow, recognizing her dependence on God, devoted all that she had to God. In her need, she saw the nature of the world and the sovereignty of God with a clarity that escaped all those self-congratulatory types who believed that they could fulfill their obligations to God with the spare change of their lives, with what was left over when the supposedly important things had been taken care of. "Did you see that widow?" Jesus, the mystery worshipper, asked. "She gave all that she had." I'm wondering what Jesus, the mystery worshipper, thinks about me. Amen.