

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A Sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
November 8, 2015

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You have heard the saying “trying to put a mind straight is about as successful as straightening a dog’s tail.” The moment you let go of the tail it curls again. Certain minds are like that. They lose their straightness the moment they reject guidance.

In the Gospel Our Lord Jesus offers guidance running opposite prevailing attitudes. On the issue at stake most of us are in trouble. Due to our worldly environment, and its powerful influence on us, we are like the dog’s curly tail. When we are with Jesus we are all right. But the moment we stray from His guidance we easily make evaluations inconsistent with Christ’s teaching.

His teaching here is about the worth of human beings in the sight of God. And the shock to our perception is that Almighty God does not confer value on the basis of power and wealth, (any more than He does on the basis of lineage, skin color, education, or religion.) The world values the rich man more than it values the widow. And it will always do that. No surprise there! You remember the line in *Fiddler on the Roof* when Tevye says, “When you’re rich they think you really know.” But the moment we Christians forget the Lord’s straightening us out on the matter, we fall in with the world’s mindset. Like the dog’s tail!

In the gospel incident there is nothing requiring us to believe the widow was a particularly saintly woman. Rather, she was most likely seeking God’s help in some direct and material way. It was her version of “Dear Santa, please give me a shiny new Schwinn for Christmas!” Whatever her need, it caused her to stake everything upon God. That is what Our Lord pointed out to the disciples about her. “She has put in *everything she had*, her whole living.”

Anyone who comes to this point of extremity, and realizes there is no hope but in God, has become a realist. That is the verdict of the Son of God. Unlike many rich men who make their token contribution and wander off in the delusion their wealth saves them, this widow knows the real score. Jesus teaches us to approach God like her. It isn’t a teaching about rich versus poor, but about attitudes and disposition in our approach to Almighty God.

Saintliness is not on the playing field here. Jesus never says of the widow, “See how she loves God.” In fact *many* of the Lord’s parables involve persons who are

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acting simply out of self-interest. His message is when we get clear about what our self-interest really is we will seek the direct and personal relationship with Almighty God. Nor are we called necessarily to be poor financially. But the widow was *totally poor*. It is because she knew she was helpless, and ultimately dependent upon the mercy which cannot be bought or earned, she was ready to receive the unconditional Divine Love God wants to give each of His children.

What we see in this incident is amazing. The Lord Jesus Christ has nothing better to do in His zeal for souls than to sit down opposite the Jerusalem treasury and watch the crowd put money into the poor box! Why? He can tell the state of our souls' health by whether we contribute liberally or sparingly, cheerfully or reluctantly. And it is obvious Jesus notices not only the amount we contribute but *the heart of the matter*: what principle guides our action, what our views are in giving, whether we do it to be seen of men or "as unto the Lord."

It is easy for the story of the widow's mite to be put at arm's length where it can make no claim upon us. The incident is dismissed by some Bible commentaries as "a paradigm in our folklore." Good grief! Leave it to Saint Augustine to bring the heat! His advice is, "Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need: the remainder which you do not require is needed by others."

All through Scripture the memory is held up to us of individual souls who were generous with God and direct with Him. There is the widow of Zarephath whose nearly empty jar of meal and cruse of oil never gave out after she made a loaf for Elijah. A favorite Gospel incident shows us what Christ did for 5000 guests, feeding them from a boy's basket lunch. Saint Paul praised the Macedonian churches whose "deep poverty abounded to the riches of their liberality."

Our Lord Jesus is gracious. He requires according to what we have, ever according to what we don't have. He commends the widow who with habitual generosity (for she did not know God Incarnate was watching her!) cast in both coins although it was all her living. Well.....Jesus wants all my living too. *And He wants yours.*