

**32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 7, 2009  
4:00 P.M.**

**J.A. Loftus, S.J.**

**Oscar Wilde once said: “Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.”**

**I sometimes imagine that Jesus must have felt the same sentiment. He tried so hard to teach—by word and example—what was really worth knowing: how the kingdom of God is to be recognized and lived. But so few seemed to catch-on, to learn how to do it.**

**Today’s gospel comes at the end of a long line of public chastisements of the scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ own time. In Mark’s gospel, Jesus repeatedly denounces the public displays of the scribes as they try to impress others with their smiles, and their mostly empty talk of the law. As Jesus says today: “They devour widow’s houses,” and, for the sake of appearances, say long prayers and pretend to be generous. Their pseudo-graciousness, Jesus says in another place, smells like a whitened, open sepulcher. He is not at all impressed with the “show.”**

**And so he tries to teach his disciples again what is really worth knowing. Jesus and his friends sit down in the Temple. They are “people watching,” a great pass-time many of us probably enjoy as well. He observes an old widow by the treasury and teaches his disciples that she is putting in more to the**

**community and its treasury than all of the others. She gives all she has to support the temple and she understands how the kingdom of God really works.**

**It is worth noting that this gospel passage is the last public appearance Jesus makes before his farewell talk to his disciples and his passion week begins in Jerusalem. They are about to witness Jesus' own generosity up close! That is the context.**

**Because of that context, this gospel passage is often misunderstood. It is not really just about money at all, or about poverty and plenty, or about who has more and who has less. This passage is a stark reminder to all of Jesus' listeners that the obligation to the community, to the people of God, to the Temple is what's missing in many so-called donations. It's not about how much money you have; it's about how freely you give to support the needs of others. And those needs are sometimes physical, sometimes emotional, sometimes spiritual.**

**Jesus sounds angry, but his anger is motivated not simply by the fact that this widow is poor as a penny. Jesus is angry that the widow had a right to have more; she should have been better cared-for to begin with. That was and still is the Law of Moses that trumps all other laws; widows had a very**

special place in Jewish community. *Caring for each other in realistic ways is what it means to say you love God.* It's all about generosity of spirit. And here was the Temple itself exploiting her—in the name of God and religion! There is a lesson that needs to be taught here. And perhaps taught again and again.

We, too, have a community—a big community we call church, and a little community we call St. Ignatius. We sometimes don't like everybody in those communities; we certainly don't always agree with what everybody is saying or how they are acting. We don't always *feel* like being generous, or *feel* like being supportive, or *feel* like even being civil with each other. But the point of Jesus' story today is that, behind the obvious part about who has how much money to contribute to the temple, lies the real point. Everyone in the community has a right to be treated with generosity and respect. Everyone!

I certainly do not want to discourage anyone from being or looking conspicuously generous in their donations. By all means be as conspicuous as you wish. Fr. Bob would not have it any other way! But it is important to realize that it is not just about the amount one can contribute; it is about a certain generosity of spirit to the community that will make all the difference.

I think of Oscar Wilde again. "Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." I hope and pray he's wrong. Because there are things worth

**knowing about God's life and God's graciousness, and God's generosity that have to be taught. And if we don't teach each other—not in our words but in our deeds—then who will teach them?**

**It is important to be taught, as our first reading suggests, that the poorest of the widows among us are sometimes visited by the greatest of prophets, like Elijah. And miracles can happen. And it is important to be taught that even the greatest of prophets, like Elijah, get hungry and need to be fed. And it is important to be taught that when all is said and done (as I frequently say in funeral homilies), at the end of all of our lives, generosity of spirit, largeness of heart, will be our final judge. All that is really important is that we can say at the end: we have lived fully and have loved well. That we have lived with magnanimity, with generosity of spirit.**

**That is something that certainly is worth knowing. And it can be taught. Oscar is wrong in this instance. Important things can be taught and learned. So I urge us all: Be teachers and learners of generosity—together. And the Kingdom of God will be ours. Peace!**