

What do we do to live out our faith? What are the concrete actions we take to practice our religion? It's an important question, because religious practice is important. The word "religion" means more than just "what we believe." Religion is not just a creed or a confession that we agree to treat as true. Religion is that which binds together all the parts of a life—the word "religion" comes from the Latin *re-ligare*, which means "to tie together again"—religion is a connected *way of living* which gives us communion with the different parts of our psyches, and the different people around us, and the divine in whom we live and move and have our being. Religion isn't just about what we believe, it's about how we act, it's about a way of life that has a *purpose* and expresses that purpose through intentional *practice*.

Our Gospel today shows us Jesus commenting on practice and purpose in two different exemplary characters. On one side is Jesus' condemnation of the scribes; on the other side is Jesus' commendation of the widow.

Jesus condemns the scribes for being hypocrites. "Beware of the scribes," he warns his disciples, "because everything they do, they do for the sake of appearance." They have significant practices, to be sure: they wear long robes with prayer shawls and tassels and fringes so that their very clothing shows that they pray at all times. They say long prayers, so that people will be impressed by their piety and their devotion and their eloquence. They're always visible in the synagogue, sitting in the best seats, so that people can see they don't miss a Sabbath day and they're fine upstanding pillars of the religious community. They all do everything right, Jesus says; they all look fine and holy from the outside, Jesus says; but inside, Jesus says, their motives and their purposes are very far from holy. They like the best seats in the synagogues and the banquets because it makes them feel important. They like to be greeted with respect and honor because it feeds their egos. They like it when people trust them and put their faith in them, because then they can ask for big gifts and offerings, and so they devour widow's houses. Beware of the scribes' hypocrisy, Jesus says, because they do all the right things, but for all the wrong reasons. They will receive the greater condemnation, Jesus says, because they've used religious practices to serve their own self-centered purposes.

In contrast to all of that stands the widow, the poor woman who comes up to the Temple treasury and puts in two small copper coins that together barely make a day's wage. The widow also is performing a religious practice. In the Jewish piety of Jesus' time, it was expected that people would give special offerings at particular turning points in their lives, or for special prayers or intercessions or thanksgivings, when there was an illness in the family, or a healing, or the harvest was good, or a business deal worked out. The practice of making special offerings constituted a kind of running dialogue between God and the people, an ongoing exchange of gift and blessing and thanksgiving and grace that lived out the relationship of faith. At its best, that system of special offerings was a way of opening up every part of your life to God, and recognizing God's gifts given in every part of your life. So what the widow is doing when she puts her coins in the treasury is not particularly unusual. What makes the widow's gift so special in Jesus' eyes is that she gives everything she has to live on—her gift symbolically proclaims her faith that God will sustain her in her need, and her gift actually lives out that faith by giving up the two coins that could sustain her if she kept them for her own. She really gives her living to God; and that makes her offering not just something she does because it is religiously expected, not just something done for outward show; but her offering is motivated by a sincere and deep and unshakable faith in the God who loves the righteous, who cares for the stranger, who sustains the orphan and widow, who gives justice to the oppressed and food to those who hunger. The widow's gift is great, Jesus says, because it really practices her faith in the purposes of God.

So the contrast Jesus draws is between the scribes whose practice is big on the outside but whose purposes are small and self-centered, and the widow whose practice is small on the outside, almost negligible, but whose purpose is filled with love and faith. The contrast is all about the motives, the reasons, the intentions we have for doing religious things. The contrast is between those who use religious practice for their own selfish purposes, and those whose religious practice is a way of opening themselves up to be used for the purposes of God.

And that contrast in the Gospel puts the question to us: What are *our* reasons for doing the religious things we do? What motivates *us* to pray or sing or give or be seen in church? What's the purpose behind our practice? What do we do to live out our faith?

I suspect that for most of us our practices and purposes are kind of mixed. In this life, it's very seldom that we have really pure motives for anything we do. I suspect that most of us have some scribe and some widow in us at the same time. I know that's true of me. I practice coming to church regularly because it's my job, because it's what you all called me here to do, because if I just didn't show up on Sunday it would leave a lot of people hanging, and a lot of people would be upset with me, and I generally don't like having people upset with me. I practice coming to church because I like doing liturgy, I enjoy dressing up in vestments, I get a kick out of singing at full voice, I like it when people listen to my words and pay attention to my work. It serves my purposes to be here. But of course that's not the only reason I have for being here. I'm here because this is where God calls me to be, because God puts it in my heart to love the church, because it takes me out of myself and it takes me beyond my selfish motives and it makes me part of something greater than myself, because it challenges me and stretches me and reassures me and draws out what is best in me, because it is not just my job but my vocation, my calling, the calling of my heart and the calling of my community. I'm here this morning, and it's my practice to be here day by day in this ministry, because this is how I offer myself to be used for God's purposes of proclaiming Good News and celebrating the sacraments and building up the life of this Christian community and doing Christ's work in the world. So I get something out of this, but I give something to it as well; I've got a little bit of scribe in me, and a little bit of widow too.

And I suspect that's true for every one of us. We pursue the practices of religion—we come to church, we say our prayers, we study the scriptures, we do good works in the world—for a variety of reasons, for different purposes, from different motivations, and some of those motivations are, frankly, better than others. The Gospel today calls each one of us to look at ourselves, to look into our own hearts, and to be honest about our practice, to be honest about our purpose, to be honest about why we do the things we do as we strive to live the Christian Way.

And the good news is that when we practice that kind of honesty, when strive to be genuine about practice and purpose in our religious lives, then that honesty opens up in us the space where God can touch us with transforming grace. The good news is that God can take even the smallest offering we make of our selves, God can take even the most mixed motivations, and God can bring forth from them devotion and compassion and prayer and action and love that go far beyond what we thought we were capable of. The good news is that we don't have to get our motivations *perfect*, only *honest*—because God is the one who takes an honest offering and perfects it in the perfect love of Christ.

What do we do to live out our faith? We start here, in this Eucharist, where we offer ourselves to God; where, in the name of Christ, we offer bread and wine and money and *us* at this altar; where God takes our offering and blesses our offering and gives our offering back to us, so that we may be nourished and strengthened and empowered and filled to overflowing with living love of Christ. That's the purpose of our practice. And that's what motivates all our practices as we live the Way of Christ. Amen.