

## **Mic and Muhammad**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

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### **Mark 12:38-44**

*It was festival week in Jerusalem. Large crowds of pilgrims had gathered, coming from near and far. Jesus and his disciples, fresh from Galilee, were among them.*

While he was teaching, [Jesus] said, “Watch out for the scribes! They like to go around in distinctive robes. They like formal greetings in public places, the best seats in synagogues, places of honor at dinners. And they devour widow’s houses while making a show of their long prayers. They are going to be condemned more severely.”

Now, he sat down across from the offering box and was watching the whole crowd of people put money into it. Lots of rich people put in a lot. Then a poor widow came and put in two very small coins, the equivalent of a Roman penny. So he called for his disciples and said to them, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow put more in the offering box than all the others did. They all put in some of what they had plenty of. But she put in all of what she didn’t have enough of, her entire living.”

### **Children’s Story**

Long ago, the Great Forest was filled with strange and wonderful creatures. Probably none was so strange as Gladys the Gopher.

When she talked to you, Gladys didn’t look at your face. She looked over your shoulder instead. When she walked, Gladys didn’t walk in a straight line. She went a little bit crooked. And whenever she went into her gopher hole, Gladys always missed the opening the first time.

Stevie the Squirrel and his friends didn’t know what to think of Gladys the Gopher. Sometimes they thought she was from another world. She sure didn’t seem to know her way around this world. She was always losing her way in the Great Forest.

Then Gladys went to the optometrist to get her eyes checked. It turned out there was nothing wrong with her at all, except her eyesight, which was terrible.

With her eyes, Gladys couldn’t see straight and she couldn’t see in focus. What she could see with her eyes was double. That’s why she looked over your shoulder when she was talking to you, because she saw another face there.

After her visit to the optometrist, Gladys started to wear eyeglasses. Now, at last, she could see! Now she could see the Great Forest the way it really was, see her gopher hole the way it really was, see all of her friends the way they really were.

For Gladys, it was like seeing for the first time. And it changed the way she lived, Gladys the Gopher with her new glasses.

### **Sermon**

On route 495 in east central Massachusetts, distances are given in both miles and kilometers. The signs have been there since the 1970s. Now they are a fading memorial to a failed effort to convert to the metric system. It’s not an easy thing to do, to change the way things are measured. In Europe, the change accompanied economic and political revolutions. Here in the U.S., we have stubbornly resisted making the change. We prefer our miles and acres, our pounds and pints, and our degrees Fahrenheit. Sure, we’ve made concessions. Our medicines are in milligrams, and our V8s are in liters. But we still measure the world in inches and ounces. That’s the lens we look through. That’s how we see the world.

Today’s gospel is about changing the way we measure things. And, of course, if we change the way we measure things, that will change the way we see the world – which is precisely the gospel point.

**In today's gospel reading, Jesus is taking the measure of people.** First, we have the scribes, the experts in Torah, who interpret God's Law for today. They had academic credentials which they wore on their sleeves, and no wonder. With those credentials flowing, they received respectful greetings from their colleagues and deferential responses from ordinary folks. With those credentials, they were free to occupy the choicest seats, whether at Friday prayers or at Sunday dinners. And with those credentials, they were able to make proper, legal-according-to-the-Law-of-God moves to increase their assets. Widows, for example, had little legal standing. They were sitting ducks before powerful pressure from these publicly pious professionals. But Jesus took the measure of the scribes, and they came up wanting. Serious trouble was waiting for them, he said. And it would overtake them.

Next, we have rich pilgrims, come to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. Like the rest of the people, they had performed a pious, pilgrim duty. Outside the Temple treasury, there were a series of receptacles for offerings. At some point during festival time, every devout person would pass by and make an offering. Rich people, more often than not, would put a lot of money into the offering box. Well, of course they would. It was only right for them to do that. And we should note that Jesus does not criticize them. He merely makes an observation: "They all put in some of what they had plenty of" (v. 44a).

Finally, we have the poor widow. She, too, had come to the Temple treasury. She, too, had made her festival offering. It wasn't much. In fact, it was almost nothing. Not enough for a new bronze basin. Not enough for a container of incense. Not enough for some crimson thread to repair the Temple curtains. I wonder if it was even worth counting.

It was almost nothing, what the poor widow gave. But it was everything. It was her entire living. She had nothing more to give. And we know how Jesus measured her gift. He said it was worth more than all the other gifts combined – gifts that would repair the Temple roof, gifts that would resupply stocks of wood and oil, gifts that would repair or replace worn utensils and worn priestly garments. The widow's gift was nothing. It was good for nothing. But it was worth more than all that. That's what Jesus said. That's how he looked at the world. That's how he measured things, how he measured people.

**Few of us measure things or measure people the same way, unless the Gospel has truly shaped us.** When I first heard this story, it seemed obviously and intuitively right. Of course the widow's gift was a greater gift! It had cost her a lot more. It had cost her everything. There was no comparison. But when I tried to make that point to my friend Mic, he didn't buy it.

Mic had been impressed by some large charitable gift that Muhammad Ali had just made. (This was thirty years ago!) It was an impressive gift. I don't remember how much it was or what it was for, but it was impressive. Actually, though, I thought Mic was too impressed by Ali's gift. In raw numbers the gift was impressive. But as a percentage of Ali's wealth, it was not so impressive. At least, I didn't think so.

I told Mic that an ordinary person giving a much smaller gift would be more impressive, a person giving enough so that it really hurt, no matter how small the dollar amount. It was an obvious point, I thought, the same point that Jesus had made. But Mic didn't buy it, not at all. He just couldn't see it. What mattered was the size of the gift and how it could be used. Mic and I argued back and forth for quite a while, but he never saw what seemed so obvious to me.

Not that I was, or that I am, so gospel-shaped myself. Honestly, I don't measure things and I don't measure people so much the way Jesus does. Now, some of that I can't help. It's the media. The media most often tell me stories about the biggest, the richest, the most powerful, and the most famous people. And I like those stories. In a waiting room, I pick up People magazine and leaf through it. That way I stay in touch with the rich and famous and what they're up to. People always has an article or two about ordinary people, too. But I skip those. Who cares about ordinary people?!

I suppose if the media spent a lot of time on the extraordinary generosity of ordinary people, on the extraordinary love of ordinary people, and on the extraordinary faith and sacrifices of ordinary people – I suppose then I would pay attention. Maybe. But somehow my attention is easier to capture when the people in the story are extraordinarily rich, extraordinarily rugged, or extraordinarily beautiful. My attention is easier to capture when the story features homes that are extraordinarily large, cars that are extraordinarily fast, and stakes that are extraordinarily high. But none of that seems terribly gospel-shaped, does it?

**I wonder what would happen if we measured things and if we measured people, including ourselves, the way Jesus does.** I'm guessing that we would be far less impressed with the rich and the famous than we are now. And isn't it high time that we stopped listening to them and to their publicists, to their constant reminders to us of how important they are, what with their academic credentials? Or with their financial credentials? Or with their political credentials? Or with their white teeth, clear skin, and big boobs credentials? We don't seriously think any of that impresses Jesus, do we?

And he's probably not as impressed with us as we are either. In the Diary of a Wimpy Kid books, young Greg Heffley is pretty impressed with himself. He thinks he's one of the cleverest, kindest, sanest people around. But he's a bit generous in that self-evaluation. I wonder how much of Greg Heffley is in me. Am I as generous as I think I am? Am I as thoughtful, am I as devoted, as I think I am? Am I even remotely aware of how little the Gospel has shaped my values? Aware that I have had a thousand teachers, each with their own agenda? Aware that I am better at dropping Jesus' name than at dropping everything to follow him?

But what would happen if we started to pay attention to people, like Jesus watching the people at the Temple treasury? What would we see if we dared to look a little deeper than the outward action? What would we see if we dared to look closely to discern the heart? Who would impress us then, especially if we tried to see the way Jesus sees?

Would we be impressed by the person with the most money? By the woman with the longest legs? By the man with the fastest time in the 100? Or would we be impressed by the young man with multiple handicaps, sitting in his wheelchair, taking our tickets at the movies? Or by the illegal immigrant from Mexico who juggles three jobs to take care of her children? Or by the overworked, underpaid social worker who just won't give up on kids?

And what would happen if we wanted somehow to impress Jesus ourselves? It's probably too late for this year, but Jan and I were talking about this the other day. What if we decided to host a Thanksgiving dinner here, a dinner for people who have nowhere to go or nothing to eat, certainly not a feast, on Thanksgiving Day, a dinner not at some less-than-optimal time, but at prime Thanksgiving dinner time, so that our Thanksgiving Day is all about our neighbors who need a feast, and if we want a feast, we can eat with them, and if we want a family feast we can do it on the Friday or Saturday after Thanksgiving Day? What if we decided that that was a good way to use this building and a good way to use our money and our time and our love?

Of course, to get there, to get anywhere near any of this, we would have to change the way we measure things and change the way we measure people, including ourselves. And that's no easy thing to do. It's like trying to adopt the metric system. But change the way you measure things, and you change the way you see the world. And the Gospel has everything to do with that.