

“How Much Is Enough?” / Mark 12:38-44 / 4 November 2012

My new philosophy of watching the news is this: The world can be a scary place, but no matter how bad things get, they're never as bad as Anderson Cooper says. At least that was our experience here in Pittsburgh when it came to Superstorm Sandy. Now, I realize that Sandy wreaked untold havoc on some Caribbean islands, including Haiti. And they're still discovering the extent of the damage along the seaboard. It's true that the storm caused about fifty deaths in the US, many due to falling trees. Some folks in low-lying areas had to leave their homes and belongings. There were power outages. The infirm had to go without proper medical care. It's a mess. But on the whole, I don't think things turned out quite as badly as some of us expected. And when I say “some of us,” I'm talking about my eight-year-old daughter, Chloe.

She is a worrier. If I make a U-turn, she says, “Are we lost?” If I say we need to stop and get gas, she says, “Are we going to run out?” Any father knows that a big part of his job in life is simply to make his children feel safe. And so, last Sunday, as the storm-reporting reached a fever pitch, and my daughter watched with growing fear, I promised her that I would put together a storm shelter in our basement. River flooding didn't seem like much of a risk for us, since the house is built on a plateau high above Chartiers Creek. Our greatest danger came from the possibility of high winds in the old oaks and silver maples that surround the place. For that reason, the basement seemed like the best spot to set up an emergency shelter. I didn't expect that we would end up using it, but as I said, the point was to alleviate one little girl's fears.

I chose the driest corner of a damp, 150-year old cellar. I swept the space out and installed a light bulb in a long-empty socket. Then I set about the task of deciding what we would need if, God forbid, we had to take shelter from the winds. And you know...we needed surprisingly little. Amazingly little, really. Four bag chairs, a few blankets, a five-gallon collapsible water jug, some candles, some matches. We have more Mason jars full of canned goods than we'll eat in months, so I didn't bother with food. In fact, everything I put into our little storm shelter came straight from the bin where we keep the camping supplies. There was no need for anything else. Then, when the kids got off the school bus, they both ran straight to the basement to see their storm shelter. And my little worrier was at peace. She was visibly relieved, and instead of fretting, as she'd been doing since Saturday, she ran off to play the way eight-year-olds are supposed to do. I didn't have the heart to tell her that torrential rains always flood our basement, that it would be a terrible place to spend a few days, our feet wet to the ankles. I didn't tell her that the whole thing was mostly a placebo to make her feel safe.

But the point is this: When it came time to prioritize, when it came time to assemble the basic necessities for life and happiness in a sopping wet basement, I discovered (as you surely would) that we needed very little. We needed clean water and food. We needed shelter and light. We needed each other. And all the many gadgets that occupy most of our waking hours, the computers, the telephones, the lawn mowers, the cars, the books, the irreplaceable family heirlooms, like that antique bed that belonged to my great-great grandparents, the house itself with its beautiful old trees: In a moment of duress, let the wind and the water take them all. I don't need them. Take all those other things, too, that I think about waking and sleeping: the passions, the old regrets, the achievements. Some people outlive all those things. Take them. I have enough.

What do you really need for life and happiness? When it comes right down to it, how much is enough for physical, and emotional, and spiritual wellness? What do we really need in this world of things? And if it were all threatened by some natural or manmade disaster, what few things would we reach for, before boarding the bus toward the FEMA refugee camp? As I pondered these questions, in the wake of Superstorm Sandy, I realized that our ritual acts here at church center around the things that we would stash in our storm cellars if the need arose: water, food, light...and who knows, maybe a little wine? In fact, our faith's most meaningful ceremonies are the Lord's Supper and baptism: a meal and a bath—which are the two things that you would want more than anything else if a hurricane flattened your home. And so, I ask, how much is enough?

Sit with Jesus under the grand marble portico of the Jerusalem Temple. He's just watching the people as they pass. He's observing them as they drop their offerings into the plate. The priests parade around in their robes, and the nobles in their finery, making a show of their generosity. The common folks make their way hither and yon, not caring to be noticed. And out of this churning multitude, a poor widow emerges. Neither proud nor ashamed, she simply drops in her two halfpennies into the plate and walks away. And Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had."

That unnamed woman then exits the pages of our holy book. We never learn her name, and we never see her again. Unless, of course, you consider the fact that she shows up in Presbyterian churches every fall...just in time for stewardship season! I think we run the risk of seeing that widow as a tragic figure, a feeble, unhappy little thing. But really, who is going to go home from the temple contented? The person who felt the need to make a show of his or her generosity, the one who paraded around in fine vestments, the one who needs everyone to be impressed with his or her status and position? Or the one who came because she wanted to, gave what she could because she wanted to support a cause she believed in, and spared not a thought for what others might think of her? Sometimes it takes a storm of gigantic proportions to show us which things in life matter and which don't. This widow has clearly been through the storm, bereft of her husband in a society that was even harder on women than our own, cast upon her on small resources. She's been through the storm, and she's come out on the other side wiser and—paradoxically—more joyous. This unnamed widow knows the joy of not worrying about the things that, in the end, don't really matter. Don't you envy her simple ability to give what she wants to give and not worry about appearances...or tomorrow?

You and me, we have to worry about our clothes, and our lawns, and our...hair. We have to worry about our neighbors' opinions, and what folks say about us at the PTA. We have careers, mortgages, car payments, investments, and who isn't worried about their retirement? But really, when our loved ones and our adult children stand around dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs, and the guy in the black robe recites the *Nunc Dimittis* ("Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace"), what will have mattered? The people standing there will have mattered, and a few others who've already made that final journey. Our relationships with those people, the faith that we left in their spirits, the sense of safety and love that we've planted in their hearts. What matters is the condition in which we've left this world. But sometimes (like that widow) we learn what matters after life's storms strip us of the things that don't.

Some things don't make sense. The bank leaves its vault door standing wide open, but they chain the pens to the counter. People order a double cheeseburger with fries and a "diet" Coke. Hotdogs come in packages of ten, but hotdog buns come in packages of eight. Drive-up ATMs have Braille lettering. A lot of things in life don't make sense. Does it make sense that we throw our life's greatest energies into acquiring things that end up rusting in junkyards, all the while neglecting the faith, the hope, and the loves that matter more than life? Does it make sense when an adult yells at a child who accidentally broke some "thing," damaging that child's feelings for the sake of an object that matters so much less than the child, or the adult's relationship to the child? Does it make sense that we destroy the things we need most—the water, the air, the land—in an arrogant grab for things we don't need? How much is enough?

The days could be coming in the life of our world, or in your private life, when you will need some serious inner resources to get you through. Those inner resources are things like strength, hope, courage. When the storms strike, we'll find these things inside ourselves if we've bothered to cultivate them when the weather was good. On one hand, if we've invested our life's wherewithal into things that matter little, then that will be its own reward. We'll have lots of nice stuff to maintain and show off, perhaps a good name and a lovely home. These aren't bad, but they are insufficient. On the other hand, if we—like that happy widow—have invested ourselves in things that matter much—in relationships, in good causes, in our faith communities, in our church—then those investments will come back to bless us when the cold winds blow. Am I saying that God will make you happy if you give money to the church? Absolutely not! I'm saying that we, like that widow, need to entrust our resources to things that matter...things we actually need. What we need—you and I—what we need is water, light, bread, and wine. We need each other. For what things in life do you dedicate the greatest part of your energies? Your time? Your resources? Are they things that make our world a better place? Are they things that instill you with the strength, the hope, and the courage that we all need? How much is enough? Amen.