

# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from November 8, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg  
“Going for Broke”

Scriptures:  
1 Kings 17:8-16  
Mark 12:38-44



**W**e never really had that much, but once the Romans took over, things got even worse. My husband had a little bit of land outside the city of Jerusalem. It was enough for us to grow the food we needed and a little bit extra for the other farmers in our community who might need it from time to time, just as we did occasionally. Then Judea became a province of Rome. When Rome took over, they allowed us to keep our customs and our infrastructure, but in return we had to pay them tribute, taxes. They kept our native rulers in place—the chief priests and the scribes and the elders—and used them and our local tax collectors to collect from us, from the people, the taxes that Rome demanded. You see, we didn’t have separation of church and state as you do now in this country. We had a temple-state where the chief priests governed as well.

Well, our own native aristocracy demanded from us a portion of our harvest and if we got behind, they wanted more and we watched many of our neighbors lose their land to them. Oh, they could stay there, but it wasn’t theirs anymore—they just had to keep working it to pay the taxes and make the offerings. Many gave up and just wandered the city. Many became day laborers—or even slaves—working the land that had been taken over by others. It was so hard.

Then my husband died. We had no children and in those days, widows were not allowed to manage their own finances. The scribes were only too happy to do that. The temple was supposed to take care of me. I couldn’t work the land myself, so they took it. I had a little bit of money, but it was never enough to keep up with the taxes, the tithes. I was hungry and I was pretty much hopeless. I noticed the people around me becoming worse off, too, but the scribes and the priests—they had new robes and they were always going to one banquet or another. I heard, and I believe every word, that they were keeping a lot of the money for themselves! Not all of it was going to Rome, I can tell you that! And people like me—well, they always said I owed more—this tax or that fee—but not to worry because they were handling it. I was just a poor widow! They would handle everything. Well, by the time they were through, I had nothing left! I ended up staying in my friend’s son’s house, so at least I wasn’t on the street.

The day I saw Jesus of Nazareth, I had almost stayed home. I had only two coins left, hardly enough to make a decent offering, but it was all I had. I knew if I stayed away, they’d figure out some way to get it out of me anyhow, and besides I wanted, no—I needed, to visit the

temple and be near the presence of God. That was about 40 years before the temple was finally destroyed by the Romans, before we began to worship in other places. Back then, the Jerusalem temple was the only place that real worship to God took place. So I went.

When I arrived, it was crowded. The rabbi Jesus, the one from the house of David, had been teaching in the temple and there were many people that had come with him from Galilee. I could tell by their accents they weren't from around Jerusalem. Oh, and the scribes were there, of course, sitting right up front as usual. Everyone was bringing their offering up front to the treasury. The rabbi Jesus had seated himself right there, across from the treasury, and he was watching and listening. I was so curious about him! I had heard people talking about what a great teacher he was and some even said he had been casting out demons and healing the sick out in the villages. Some said he might be the prophet Elijah come back to rescue us. Jesus talked of a new kingdom and let me tell you, we were ready! We had had enough of the Romans and the Pharisees and the scribes. Some talked of uprisings. Some were even beginning to refuse to work the land. Just walking off and leaving. There were days when you could cut the tension with a knife.

Well, I had the two coins in my hand and I was terrified. This was all I had left, but I needed to offer something to God. If I put these coins in the treasury, I really didn't know how I was going to eat the next day. I was bone-tired and hungry and so weary of my lonely life that had been cast aside because I had no husband, with too many rules and no choices. I knew I was going for broke as I began to walk forward to the treasury. I kept my eyes down, of course, out of reverence, but as I got closer, my curiosity got the best of me and I looked up at this Jesus.

His eyes met mine and I will never, ever forget that moment. He knew. He understood. He felt my pain, my fear, my loneliness. For the first time in my life I looked into the face of someone who cared, who had compassion, who without so much as a word communicated to me that I had value, that I had suffered unjustly, that I was loved. As I turned to walk back to the rear of the temple, I heard him say to the men who were with him: "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, all she had to live on." He knew. He understood.

Well, you know the rest of the story, because you're here. Right around Passover they arrested him. Oh, how they mocked him. They sent in the Roman soldiers for that one. I can't even describe how horrible it was.

But then some time later, his followers came back teaching about him and how he had risen from the dead! First we met secretly, but everyone was included, even a poor widow like me! And his message of love and forgiveness and eternal life was such good news to my ears! And I remembered my father many, many years before, reciting our Hebrew scripture about Isaiah bringing good news from God to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release the prisoners! I heard Jesus' followers' testimony and I knew they were right and I knew I needed to follow because I saw his face, I saw his eyes full of love for me!

And I'm here this morning to tell *you!* You are so fortunate to be able to live his word! You don't have to meet in secret. You have churches everywhere and you know that God is not just in one temple. You carry Jesus right here in your hearts and his Holy Spirit surrounds you!

Jesus still brings comfort to those who mourn and hope to the hopeless. We have to take that message and continue to share it. On a Pledge Sunday like this one, you need not tremble in fear in the rear of the church as I did in my temple. We have something very precious to take care of and it goes beyond buildings and hedges and windows: we need to take care of Jesus' message to love one another and to pass it on. We can't let it die. We can't let it become old news. We can't let it become irrelevant in a world that so desperately needs it. People still take advantage of widows—from home repairmen to auto mechanics to TV evangelists—but Jesus showed us how to make things right: through care and compassion and forgiveness. By showing us we can rise above it.

We are his eyes now. We are his voice pointing out injustice. We are his feet leaving the temples we have built to wealth and abuse of God's creation. We are his hands knocking on doors to let him in. We are his love—taking the risks, going for broke, to grow it, to spread it, to proclaim it: that Jesus and his love are still alive! Amen.

