

“A Widow’s Mite”

It has been demonstrably true for several decades now that, proportionately, the poor are more charitable than the well-to-do. Various theories have been advanced to explain why that is, some of which make sense, others of which are patent nonsense. One of the nonsense theories is that the poor are just better people than the rich — I’d call that ridiculous. One of the explanations that makes some sense is that the poor, because they have a deeper appreciation for what it means to have to go without, are more understanding of another person’s plight and thus more willing to help. Another viewpoint suggests that when we acquire “things, stuff,” that is, as we grow more wealthy, there is an almost inbred desire to protect what we have amassed, to the point where we become reluctant to give any of it away.

None of this is to say that people of means are not charitable; many are. Just check the newspapers in this broader community on any given day and you will read stories of how a million was given to underwrite this hospital wing, and several millions given to erect that campus building, and several millions more to enable to keep functioning the Cleveland Orchestra (who just got 30 million and renamed the orchestra hall to reflect it), the Art Museum (Cleveland’s or Akron’s), or Playhouse Square. When I read such stories, my first reaction, as I would hazard to guess would be yours as well, is more than likely not going to be, “*Gee, I wonder what poor person came up with that donation?*” But, when you’ve got hundreds of millions to work with (or in some cases to play with), a million here or a million there is not quite the same as giving away your last two cents with no prospects of getting any more on the horizon.

That seems to be the point of the narrative in today’s Gospel. As Jesus watches person after person make a display of the generosity of the donation being offered. Mark does not tell us this explicitly. We get no report from him of trumpet-led processions majestically moving toward

the treasury box in the temple while fair maidens scatter rose petals along the path of their master who is coming to make his ostentatious annual deposit. But we do get the feeling that, as Jesus watches, what catches His eye is the one who comes humbly, quietly, makes her gift, and leaves. What would make Him take notice of such activity if it were not in stark contrast from the way others are behaving?

Now there are immediate questions that come to the fore as we listen to Jesus comment on what He is seeing: How did Jesus know this woman was poor? How did He know she was a widow? How did He know she had given all she had?

The first two are surprisingly easy to answer: her clothing. I can't tell the difference between an Armani suit and one off the rack from J.C. Penney; both look just fine to me; but I can tell when someone is wearing a coat that has been their sole article of clothing for ten years. There is this patina of dirt and grime that just seems to cling to the attire of the abject poor. If this woman was a recent widow she would still be wearing mourning clothes (that's with a "u"); many widows in the ancient world (and some in today's world) would become eternal models for the color black.

But that last question: "*How did [Jesus] know she had given all she had?*" requires some conjecture. Now, of course, we could posit here that Jesus just "turned on the 'God juice,'" and was provided immediate supernatural insight. NO! If we are to believe Philippians 2, Jesus set aside that power in His human form. So how did the very human Jesus know? I'm guessing it was something in her body language and/or facial expression. There may have been an aura of resignation, an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders as if to say, "*Well, that's that!*" and Jesus spotted it.

It is amazing what you can perceive by actually looking at people. We spend way to much time in isolation — in our cars, in our homes, in our offices and cubicles — that we get precious little chance to do what Jesus was doing: sitting and watching people. He did it so often and so well that

He had the knack to “read” people. This is not supernatural; it is the humanity of Jesus having been honed to perfection. Maybe we should try to emulate Him in this.

Okay, so Jesus saw the woman and applauded her for her generosity that went far beyond anything that others had done. What’s the point for us? Is the point that we should “*put in everything [we have], all [we have] to live on*”? (Good luck trying to sell that one, Pastor!) Interestingly, we do not get from Jesus any kind of “*Go and do thou likewise,*” in this instance [and no, I checked, it’s not that the lectionary compilers cut it off short before we could get to that verse]. No, to discover the point I think we need to look at the entire context in Mark’s Gospel.

Today’s reading began with some sharp words from Jesus for and about the scribes, “*who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*” He sounds remarkably like many of the Old Testament prophets — like Amos and Isaiah — sounding the alarm on how the rich can so easily step over the boundaries into oppression and humiliation. It is not just the hypocrisy that Jesus condemns — the outer adornments of piety and status — it’s the actual damage that is wrought.

I remember an episode of Andy Griffith where miserly old Ben Weaver, the owner of the local department store and the richest man in town, wants Andy to execute an eviction notice on the poor Scoby family. Andy does everything he can to forestall having to do the eviction, and each time Ben insists that he is just doing what the law allows him to do. Finally, in exasperation, Andy says to Barney that he just can’t imagine anyone being that mean and nasty, and then hits on the idea of showing Ben just how mean and nasty he is and begins to follow the eviction code to the absolute letter. Of course, Ben sees how hurtful that is, and alters his course.

The Jewish codes had very specific rules concerning how the law could and could not be used against the poor. If, for example, someone owed you money, you could not confiscate his clothing or his bed roll. You could not cast a widow out of her home simply because she was a widow. In the prophets' days, those regulations were being routinely ignored. Jesus suggests that it is happening in His day, as well. [Gee, I wonder if anything like that could happen today???

So the contrast of the rapacious hypocrisy of the scribes and the honest, humble generosity of the widow are all Jesus needs to make a point which one is really on the side God wants them to be.

But it goes deeper than that. At the beginning of what has been marked as the twelfth chapter of Mark, Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard. It is another reflection the prophets, in this case Isaiah [chapter 5]. The parable says that the vineyard owner leased it to tenants who ignored him and his rightful claims, abused and killed his messengers, and finally killed the heir to the vineyard so they can grab it for themselves. Mark tells us, ***“When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him . . .”***

Then Jesus is approached with a question about paying taxes to Caesar, a trick question designed to give Him no option but to get into trouble. If He says, *“Pay taxes,”* the crowds will not like it (they hated taxes and tax collectors — is any of this sounding at all contemporary?) If He says, *“Don't pay taxes,”* they can squeal on Him to the Roman IRS. Jesus slips the horns to the dilemma with the oft-quoted, ***“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”*** His opponents, Mark tells us, are ***“amazed.”***

There's more yet: Next come the Sadducees (who did not believe in anything like a resurrection) with a convoluted story about this unfortunate woman whose husband dies. Under what was called the law of Levirate Marriage, this woman's brother-in-law married her to sire children in his brother's stead. He dies, and each succeeding brother, a total of seven, marry her to fulfil this obligation and they all die. Their

question (and you can almost hear them sniggering as they ask it): ***“In the resurrection whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.”*** Jesus’ reply: ***“Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?”*** (I’m sure that went over well.) In essence, Jesus replied, marriage in heaven is not at issue.

Not done yet. One of the scribes comes to Jesus with the question: ***“Which commandment is the first of all?”*** This may be a trick question; maybe sincere — but asked by a scribe, so it takes on suspicious connotations. Jesus quotes the great Shema from Deuteronomy — ***“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength”*** [6:4-5] — and then adds ***“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”*** [Leviticus 19:18]. Mark tells us, ***“After that no one dared to ask him any question.”***

Finally, as prelude to our Gospel for this day, Mark relates how Jesus took it another step.

We had friends back in New York with whom we got together often, and each time the wife would try to get me with a TV trivia question. One time, we walked into their house and she immediately hit me with ***“Who played Zorro on TV?”*** I didn’t hesitate a nanosecond, ***“Guy Williams.”*** That frustrated her; but what really got to her was my follow-up: ***“Thursday evenings, eight o’clock, followed by The Adventures of Yancy Derringer. Who played Yancy Derringer and what was the name of his sidekick?”*** It’s bad enough to have to put up with someone who knows the answer to what you thought was a tough question; when they show off with stuff you didn’t even know was in the realm of asking, infuriating.

Jesus sends all the questioners packing with His observations about how David’s Son is David’s Lord, and you can just see them all limping off the field dazed, muttering, angry, and really hating Jesus’ guts. Mark tells us: ***“And the large crowd was listening to him with delight.”*** — they probably didn’t understand a tenth of what Jesus had been talking about

in these conversations; they were just delighted to see Jesus get the better of these pious, arrogant, self-righteous, pompous blowhards.

Pastor, can we finally get to the point of what the widow's mite means for us? Yes. It is this: Jesus points to the widow and her gift, not because of what the gift meant concerning her poverty or anyone else's wealth. The focus is on what her donation meant about her relationship to God. All the prior questions puit before Jesus had to do with one or more of the following: See how smart I am . . . Look how important I am . . . Gaze at how clever I can be . . . Marvel at how rich I am . . . Wonder at my sincerity and piety . . . Jesus basically says, "*Ptthhhtt! On all of that!*"

What makes the widow's mite so significant is that it shows how completely she had surrendered herself to God.

God doesn't want your money (whatever the amount) [admittedly, your church may have differing ideas!]. God doesn't want your smarts, your good looks, your popularity, your expertise, your flexibility, your you-name-it. God wants your heart.

I can think of no other explanation as to why this woman dropped her last bit of coinage into the treasury. She had surrendered herself completely to God — anything and everything that followed after that was a result and consequence of that surrender. That's what Jesus saw in her. It is what He longs to see in you and in me.

So the issue is not how much money . . . or time . . . or energy . . . or anything else. "*How much?*" is not the question. "*Who?*" and "*To Whom?*" are the questions. Who has been given to God?

We end our service this morning singing: "*Take my life, that I may be consecrated, Lord, to Thee . . .*" Then we never even so much as giggle when we sing "*Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.*" Really? The stanza we end with is the one we need to walk out with: "*Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.*"

Amen.