

Alms from the Poor?

Mark 12:38-44

Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman

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³⁸As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

⁴¹He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴²A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴For 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.”

We know what this story is about, correct? A poor widow comes to the Temple. She’s dependent on the kindness of others, since widows in that socio-economic context didn’t get to control their husband’s estate. She has two small coins, which she put into the Temple treasury. She could have saved one for herself, but she gave them both. The lesson: Since she gave all that she had, poor as she was, can’t we give more generously out of our abundance? Sermon preached; we can go home.

But let’s take a second look: note the first part of today’s text: Jesus said, “Beware of the scribes...” That can be translated, “Be discerning of the scribes...” In other words, don’t be fooled by them. They are treacherous. They’re preoccupied with their own power, prestige, and possessions. They take advantage of others, especially people on the margins. Some things this text isn’t doing:

- It isn’t criticizing Judaism or religious practice.
- It’s not necessarily criticizing all scribes. Just a few verses earlier in this chapter it was a scribe who had a fruitful conversation with Jesus about the first commandment.

The term scribe here may be a catchall term for religious leaders, including wealthy priests, who are desirous of prestige, power, and possessions.

Jesus’ sharp barbs could be a criticism of trustees who looked after widows and took more from their assets than was truly warranted. Jesus knew well the Old Testament regard for widows, orphans, migrants (strangers/aliens) and the Old Testament’s condemnation of those who ignore or take advantage of them.

The attack here may also be a critique against a corrupt Temple bureaucracy. Put it in context:

- Chapter 11: Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple.
- Chapter 13: Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple in a few years.

Jesus appears to be engaging in a sustained critique of a corrupt religious system.

Could it be that Jesus’ telling the story about the widow dropping two coins—all that she had, remember—is a reminder that, though she’s giving sacrificially, she’s giving to a corrupt

system that will be wiped out in a few years? Seeing the story this way turns it on its head, wouldn't you say?

Give sacrificially? Does looking at the text through the prism of a corrupt Temple system nullify the lesson we've heard often, that the story of the poor widow giving her all should inspire us to give more, to give sacrificially? I should think not, for several reasons:

Scripture often has more than one meaning or application. So on the one hand, we could say that one meaning of this text is that we should responsibly handle the money and other resources that are given to the church. (I can assure you that money is handled very conscientiously and wisely here at Berkey Ave. At least that's my perspective from sitting on Spiritual Leadership Team and the Stewardship & Finance commission now for 9 months.

The simple meaning of this text should not be discounted: that if the widow can give all the cash she has on hand, certainly we can dig more deeply into our back accounts and accrued wealth that many of us have. Many biblical texts are multi-layered and can have a number of meanings and applications.

A few years ago I was shocked when I added up our retirement resources. I told Suzanne that, given our resources, we need to be more generous givers. And yet, I still worry that our resources will run out before we do. After all, my parents lived to 91 and 90 and my mother-in-law lived to 94. Maybe we need to pinch our pennies.

Let's take another look at the widow's mite story. Some interpreters say this story isn't just about generous **giving**; it's about generous **living**. She **gave all that she had to live on** could just as well suggest that she **gave her whole life**.

If this is true, her giving was a foreshadowing of Jesus' giving his whole life on the cross. If the widow gave all she had to an underserving system, how much more Jesus gave for a very needy, yet underserving humanity—for you and me, in other words.

The story, in other words, invites us not just to give of our financial resources; it invites us to give our lives, our treasures, to be sure, but also our talents and our time.

When I was pastoring the Toledo Mennonite Church, I caught their attention one Sunday when I said to them: "You are so generous with everything ... except your time." Many of them were busy professionals, pressed for time. Sound familiar?

Giving money may be the easier sacrifice; giving talents and time may be harder.

I've been pondering the congregational conversations at Berkey about having a mission in our community. Maybe that conversation should shift from a question about what we think Berkey in the collective should do in our community to a personal question: What am I willing to do by way of community engagement—what time, what gifts will I give? Personalizing the issue would add a little realism to the discussion.

One last swipe at the widow's mite story: We usually think of gathering alms for the poor. Here was a **poor** woman herself giving alms. Not alms *for* the poor; alms *from* the poor. Jesus doesn't criticize her for her actions. He commends her.

It's true that some—not all—poor people are very generous. They know from personal experience that they get by through the generosity of others, sometimes from people like themselves who don't have much to begin with.

But a caution is in order here: Womanist theologian Emilie Townes says "sacrifice" is a dangerous concept when used to ask those who are most vulnerable to give more—more than they should and less than we can. We already have a tax system in which working class people are expected to give a higher portion of their earnings than many wealthy people give from their assets.

But there are other ways that we Mennonites can expect too much of marginalized people—by imposing our values on them. I know one young Mennonite who works with marginalized folks from non-Mennonite backgrounds. He’s said: “It seems unwise to *expect* people who don’t have many economic resources to live a simple life or to expect a posture of humility from people who are socially marginalized.” Wise observation!

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, had a heart for the poor. He made this apt observation: “One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it – and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart.”

About the time I retired I read somewhere an admonition that every Christian should get to know poor persons—at least one poor person. When we started going to College Mennonite Church I discovered their Jubilee program, that assists people who are in dire need financially. Many times it’s a threat of having utilities cut off or eviction from their apartment. I decided to volunteer with the program.

After I became involved in the program, I had a young woman from Cuba with a one-year-old daughter come into the office seeking help. She was brought to Jubilee by a bilingual member at Hively Avenue Mennonite Church. Somehow she and her husband got from Cuba to Ecuador. From there they walked to the southern border of the U.S. They walked in the Amazonian rain forest for 10 days with little food. She was pregnant at the time. She gave birth at 7 months while walking north.

Although they were able to get legal papers because they’re from Cuba (she carries a big sheaf of them with her all the time), he was detained at the border. Eventually he was released and they made their way to Elkhart where he had a brother living. Her husband had already found a job, but I was able to give them money for their first month of rent. Incidentally, they gave their little girl the name Milagro (miracle). She truly was a miracle baby. Such resilience, such determination!

I do not tell this story to set myself up as an example; rather, it illustrates the struggle we all should have of living in a comfortable middle class world, isolated and insulated from the struggles of peoples on the margins.

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, says we can’t understand complex problems from a distance. “Proximity will teach us something about how we need to change.”

Father Greg Boyle, founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, the world’s largest gang member rehabilitation program, would agree: “You don’t go to the margins to make a difference,” he says. “You go to the margins so that folks at the margins make you different.”

Should we give more sacrificially? Undoubtedly. Should we live more sacrificially? Without a doubt. The world needs it. We need it.

