

## Giving and Faith

### Mark 12:38-44

<sup>38</sup> As 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, <sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

<sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup> Then 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. <sup>44</sup> 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."

As usual, I totally misunderstood what this scripture is directing us to understand! I thought this scripture was about sacrificial giving to the church. You know...giving beyond what others think we should be giving or giving what we can't afford to give. But it is about something much deeper in our spiritual lives. In her book *Amazing Grace* author Kathleen Norris writes about her struggle with the word "righteous."

"The word 'righteous' used to grate on my ear; for years I was able to hear it only in its negative mode, as self-righteous, as judgmental. Gradually, as I became more acquainted with the word in its biblical context, I found that it does not mean self-righteous at all, but righteous in the sight of God. And this righteousness is consistently defined by the prophets, and in the psalms and gospels, as a willingness to care for the most vulnerable people in the culture, characterized in ancient Israel as orphans, widows, resident aliens, and the poor."

Norris goes on to remind her readers that much of the fabled wrath of God in the Bible is directed against those who preserve their own wealth and power at the expense of the orphan, the widow, the resident alien, and the poor.

As we read this biblical passage, Norris's thoughtful words ring true. In the first section, Jesus warned that the scribes who walk around in long robes being greeted with respect and sitting in places of honor would face the consequences of devouring widows'

houses while they said long prayers to keep up their righteous appearances. We are with Jesus as we have little use for hypocrites—persons who are pretentious and show off their status only to draw more attention to themselves at the expense of the less fortunate.

In the second section, Jesus commented on a widow giving two small coins to the temple treasury. He simply told his disciples that the two small coins she gave were worth more than the gifts of the rich persons who gave much more money but sacrificed very little.

Together, these two sections read as a lament for and an indictment upon any religious system that results in a poor widow giving all she has so that the system's leaders may continue to live lives of wealth and comfort. The attack is on any religious practice that masks egotism and greed, where some are like leeches on the faithful, benefiting from a religious system that allows poor widows to sacrifice what little they have. We should be outraged by any system that appropriates the property of the poor and the near-destitute in order to perpetuate wealth for the elite. **Rodger Y. Nishioka**

This reminds me of Isaac and his first experience with banking. When Isaac was 18 he had an internship at Detroit Diesel and at the end of the semester he was given a financial gift. I advised him to put the money in the credit union – but he put it in a bank instead. Sometime later he came to me saying he owed the bank money because fees had used up all his deposit! An institution that was to help him financially had taken advantage of his limited resources and limited understanding of how such institutions work – he didn't read the fine print. He didn't understand that what he thought was to help him, took advantage of his lack of understanding.

Jesus condemned the religious establishment if it does the same as the banks by taking advantage of those it is designed to help. Usually, we see this passage moving from a critique of ostentatious religious practices to a display of faithful sacrifice. We must be careful in making such a move, which condemns too quickly and valorizes without full understanding. Yes, Jesus did offer a strong warning against hypocrisy and overly pious

behavior. The temptation is to make those who demonstrate such behaviors the poster children for sin, using them to avoid examining the ways in which we practice our own versions of religious overkill and encourage behavior that is really “pretend” self-denial rather than pious sacrifice. Indeed, sacrifice is a dangerous notion. It is dangerous because we often ask those who are the most vulnerable to give the most. A quick reading of this passage encourages us to read it again.

Let us pause before we put the poor widow on a suspect pedestal and ask: Why do we valorize sacrifice? This valorization is more than a slow mulling over its Latin roots, which combine "sacred" and "to make" so that sacrifice is something of value offered as an act of devotion or worship to God. In today's world, sacrifice often means something very different from an act of devotion or worship. It often means giving up more than we should and less than we can. In the United States, we ask those in the working class and those who are poor to bear the weight of tax cuts that benefit those who are wealthier. Often, those who earn less pay a higher percentage of their income in taxes than those who are wealthier. This kind of sacrifice echoes Jesus' warning in our passage for us to beware.

At times, it seems that sacrifice is best when someone else is doing it. We marvel at such figures as Mother Teresa, the families of slain or injured soldiers, police officers – like the man who rushed into the bar and grill on Wednesday night in California, and teachers in tough inner-city schools. We lift them high on the pedestal with the poor widow, keeping them distinct and distant from our daily lives. The focus is on *their* giving and the inadequacy of *ours*—but nothing changes. This is one of the problems of things we put on pedestals. We do not imagine ourselves alongside them because what they represent for us is often more than we can give or more than we can imagine we are capable of giving.

Perhaps one way to break the often-fruitless common route we take with sacrifice in this passage is to explore the meaning of offering. This delicate and significant word shift

may give us just the small change in perspective we need to mine this passage in new ways. It may help us both critique and embrace genuine sacrifice as we imagine ourselves in the story, not as those observing the poor widow, but as the two small copper coins.

Those coins represent more than money. They represent faith and belief and how these must be lived out in our lives in concrete acts and not solely by rituals that no longer hold religious power. Powerless rituals do not call forth deep acts of faith from us through our witness in the world. Instead, these heartless rituals have become pro forma ceremonies marking questionable status and fallow craven piety. The coins represent faith-filled offering found in presenting all of who we are and all we hope to become to God for service to the world. Indeed, offering in this sense is something other than prayer, tithes, or Communion. It is not so much the act of giving or receiving, as it is the act of being.

As we think through this passage, concepts come to mind when we think of offering as being personal. I think of Ryan who has befriended youth who know loss – he knows about the illness of a parent and about divorce, but he is drawn to fellow youth who have lost parents through death. I think of Dick and Karla, Ann and Murietta, Diane, Lori, Patty, Cammie and so many others through the years who have given the gifts of song, music, and service at Carriage Town Ministries. I think of Eric and Jennifer ministering to students in their work in schools; Linda ministering to young mothers and their families; of those of you who work in manufacturing and construction, in teaching, coaching and preaching, in whatever your current or past occupation. I think of many of you who are or have been care-givers to ill loved ones. It matters not whether you are young or old, you share the love of Jesus with those you meet. Many of us know people who care for or work with people with mental illness. From last Thanksgiving to Easter I had the privilege of working in a mental health clubhouse. I witnessed first-hand the staff offering kindness, dignity and respect to their members. What you give is priceless!

Another place to look is to Christ who is our ultimate example of giving himself in total devotion to God. For Augustine, our duty is to present ourselves—all of who we

are—to God in the Communion meal. However, rather than confine Augustine's compelling charge to Communion, how can we take the grace and hope we find in the wine and bread and make it live in our lives in ways that not only sustain us, but model for others the enormous power of offering all of who we are to the rest of creation? This is not something that we can do at arm's length. If we become those two small copper coins, we must *live* our lives in such a way that our offering is truly shared with others.

In this instance, value is more than being able to put monetary value on our actions or our offerings in church. This passage gives us the opportunity to explore what it means to put in everything we have, all that we have to live on as people of faith. Whatever our occupations or commitments we can see our ministries as our authentic offering to God. Each of us represents the coins. Jesus was not dwelling on our shortcomings and inadequacies, calling us, as people of faith to take the opportunity to explore the passage as an invitation to deep and abiding Christian witness as we live into the promise of creation. **Emilie M. Townes**

Many of us would disregard the widow's offering, but Jesus noticed and called his disciples to him. He wanted them to see the true faith behind their offerings: the widow's offering demonstrates her total trust in God—"she out of her poverty has put in everything she had" (v. 44). Hers was a costly discipleship, and Jesus praised her for exemplary faith, a faith that surpasses that of many religious leaders whose faith is a sham. Her trust in God is aligned with Jesus' trust. **Robert A. Bryant**

As we learn to trust God for everything, let us give ourselves to God and other in total loyal service. This is the giving that is pleasing to God!

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