

PROPER TWENTY SEVEN, PENTECOST 25, YEAR B, NOVEMBER 10, 2024

I think if we are all honest with each other we would agree that we all have a love/hate relationship with money. We love it when we have enough to splurge on a special item or vacation and hate it when we don't have enough to pay the bills. We love it when we see it grow exponentially and hate it when it decreases in value. We love it when we give it to organizations we want to help and we hate it when we constantly get bombarded by calls from charities for more money. We are even more critical how our tax money is spent. We love it when it goes to programs and things that benefit us personally and hate it when it goes to others we believe shouldn't get it at all or is being squandered. It's a love/hate relationship and we try our hardest to make sure our money is spent wisely and frugally. But most of the time it is the tough questions of how we use our money that make us uncomfortable.

Jesus also asked a lot of tough questions about money. He addressed the subject of money with regularity; it was his second favorite subject right after the Kingdom of God. Now we know Jesus dined with many rich people as he did poor people. But when it came right down to it Jesus was always raising the hard questions about money and how we use it and how it can corrupt us. Even the fact that Jesus talked about money makes us uncomfortable and we often dismiss his comments that he couldn't possibly have meant that!

Whether we like it or not we have a complex relationship with money. We tend to equate money with success and status. If we have money, we are better than those who have less. We believe money gives us automatic virtue as it gives us prestige, freedom and security.

So, when we read the story today about the widow who puts in everything she had it makes us uncomfortable. We tell ourselves she didn't have the kind of life or the kind of pressures we have. We have too many obligations and too many needs, desires and responsibilities to give away everything we have. Who is going to put groceries on the table next week, or pay the doctor bills? It isn't sensible! We call people who hoard their possessions neurotic, but we think it is equally neurotic to give away everything we have. It is counter-cultural.

However, even though we have often turned to this story as an example of good sacrificial stewardship perhaps Jesus wasn't focusing on this at all. I don't think Jesus is holding up the widow and her offering as an example of great faith and profound stewardship. Rather I believe Jesus is expressing his remorse that she has to give away the little she has left because of a corrupt temple system.

Looking at the first part of this lesson we realize it is part of a larger set of passages that focus on Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees and center on his critique of the Temple. In the Gospel of Mark when Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did little else except teach in the Temple and debate with the religious leadership there.

The first verses of this week's passage condemn the scribes precisely for "devouring widow's houses" which is shorthand for pretty much everything they own. So maybe Jesus is not so much applauding her sacrifice but rather decrying the circumstances that demand her to make such an offering, a sacrifice that will likely lead to her continuing destitution if not death. He is, in short, leveling a devastating critique

against Temple practice and those who allow, let alone encourage, this woman to give “all she had to live on” or, in a more literal translation of the Greek, her whole life!

To put it in modern terms the scribes represent the persons who use their power to take advantage of the powerless, even to the point of their destruction.

Let me give you an example. The executives of a company decide they don't want to pay the pensions they had promised their employees. So, they come up with a novel scheme: transfer the part of their company that owed the pensions to a newly-incorporated subsidiary, then bankrupt that subsidiary, thus releasing the parent company from the pension obligation. This, of course, means they won't pay any pensions, either. Workers who had counted on those pensions would now have nothing to live on. Even worse, spouses of deceased workers – widows – would be suddenly destitute.

Did the executives “devour widows' houses”? Indeed, they did. And yet, I suspect many of them didn't give it a second thought and perhaps went to church the next Sunday, sang hymns, nodded in agreement at the sermon or were at the golf course enjoying the spoils and riches that they had just brutally ripped from their workers to line their own pockets.

So maybe we can look at this story from a different perspective. First, holding the widow up as an example of faith and stewardship isn't exactly realistic. I don't think Jesus wants us to pity her nor imitate her. Rather Jesus wants us to grieve her plight and take his righteous anger of injustice to challenge corrupt systems on behalf of those like her.

Second, and far more importantly, I think the good news of this passage comes in what it says about the God we worship, the God we confess who is revealed in Jesus most clearly. God cares about this woman and her sacrifice. God sees her plight and recognizes her predicament. God will not countenance such abuse – even and especially under the guise of religious piety – and so disapproves of those who would order their world and religion to make such sacrifices necessary.

God sees her...and God cares about her. I doubt anyone else, including the religious elite parading around the Temple that day and dropping in their token offerings, noticed this woman. And I doubt the disciples following Jesus would have noticed her either, had not Jesus lifted her up for their attention.

I believe God is inviting us to look around and see each other, those in our community we know and those we don't. And I mean really see each other – the pain of those who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, race or immigration status. What about those who have been abandoned to fend for themselves and those who have been exploited? What about those who have lost hope and despair their lives are even meaningful?

God is inviting us to see them, to care for them, and to advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind. Should we stand up for those who are most vulnerable? Yes. Should we stand up against laws or customs that exploit the vulnerable? Absolutely. Should we enact policies that advance a course of action that mirrors God's intention to care always and foremost for “the least of these”? Yes

I believe we need to recognize that God believes in us enough to use us to make a difference. God invites us to care and acknowledge that we have something to contribute, that we can make a difference and that our words and actions can help bring

to fruition the kingdom of God in the here and now. Look for where God is already at work and join God's efforts to see those in distress, help them find comfort and relief, and work for a more just world. In many ways the widow trusted God despite how the temple system treated her. Jesus recognized her trust in a loving God and a kind of power her two coins symbolized: a gesture of defiance and a mark of her subversive resistance to dehumanization.

More than ever we are called to confront an unjust social order and to care for creation's most vulnerable. As followers of Christ we are to bring healing and wholeness and light and life and love to this broken and hurting world. That is our call. That is our purpose. That is our hope. Most of all, that is what our discipleship is all about. Amen.