

“Called Out from a Place of Poverty”
Mark 12: 28 – 44 18
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In Mark chapter 12, beginning at verse 38; we encounter two episodes in which religious practices are starkly contrasted. In the first (12:38-40), Jesus condemns the vanity and greed of the scribes, while in the second (12:41-44) he points to the meager offering of a poor widow as a praiseworthy example of personal sacrifice and generosity.

Taken together the two episodes provide a study in contrasts. On the one hand are the scribes, respected members of the religious community, whom Jesus condemns for their arrogance and exploitation, while on the other is a marginalized member of the community whom he praises for a touching example of faithfulness and generosity. As is the case at so many points in the gospels, here we find Jesus inverting societal expectations of what is to be valued and esteemed, depreciating the values associated with prestige and upward mobility and holding in honor humility and selflessness.

If the church is going to be the church, we have to look at how our lifestyle meshes with our faith. This means thinking seriously about such things as whether the clothes we wear are coming from sweat shops, or whether the coffee we enjoy comes at the expense of the farmer who grows the beans, about whether the homeless are getting a fair shake in Lake County, about whether we're doing enough to provide affordable housing for the people who provide the basic services to the community we live in.

We only truly receive, in the deepest sense of the word, when we give. The less selfish we are, not only with our money but also with our time, our hearts, and our souls, the richer we become, and it sometimes saves our lives.

There is a true story about the mild manner clerk who worked at a cemetery. Every week for several years he received a money order and a note instructing him to put fresh flowers on a grave.

One day a car drove up to the cemetery gates and a chauffeur came into the clerk's office to speak to him.

"The lady outside is too ill to walk," the driver explained. "Would you mind coming with me to speak to her?"

The shy clerk walked over and looked into the car, where a frail, elderly woman with sad eyes sat in the back seat with a bundle of flowers in her arms.

"I am Mrs. Adams; I am the one who has been sending you the money orders for the flowers. I came here today myself because the doctors have told me I have only a few weeks left to live. I'm not sorry really; I have nothing to live for. But before I die, I wanted to take one last look at my son's grave and put the flowers there myself."

"You know ma'am, I always was sorry you kept sending the money for the flowers," the clerk said

"Sorry?"

"Yes, because flowers last for such a short time, and no one ever gets to see them. There are thousands of people in hospitals and nursing homes who would love to see and smell fresh flowers. But there isn't anybody at that grave. Not really."

The old woman sat for a while and left without a word. The clerk was afraid he had offended her. But a few months later, he was surprised with another visit. This time there was no chauffeur. The woman had driven herself to the cemetery.

She went to the clerk's office and said,

"I've been taking the flowers to people in hospitals and nursing homes, as you suggested. You were right. It does make them

happy. And it makes me happy. The doctors don't understand what's making me well, but I do.”¹

We all have received wonderful and unexpected gifts when we give of our time, our talents, and our money. We receive in the larger sense by creating a more equitable society and in a personal sense as the story illustrates, but regardless of whether or not we receive pleasure or credit by giving, giving to those in need is a sacred obligation, part of our calling as followers of Christ.

Jesus said:

“Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did unto me.”²

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be expected.”³

Once when Mother Teresa visited Australia, a new recruit to the Franciscan order was assigned to be her guide during her stay.

Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, although he was constantly near her, he never had the opportunity to say one word to her. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, he spoke to Mother Teresa. “If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?”

Mother Teresa looked at him.

“You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?” she asked.

¹ “More Money Than God, Living a Rich Life Without Losing Your Soul” by Steven Z. Leder pp. 12-13

² Matthew 26: 40

³ Luke 12: 48

“Oh, yes,” he replied eagerly.

“Then give that money to the poor,” she said. “You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.”⁴

As John Wesley said, the challenge that greets us as disciples of Jesus is whether or not we heed God’s call by doing:

All the good we can
By all the means we can,
In the ways we can
In all the places we can
At all the times we can
To all the people we can.⁵

Jesus declared:

“The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford – she gave her all.”⁶

The example of the poor widow calls us to sit up and take note. To make any sense of Jesus’ pronouncement, we must radically adjust our value system. Christ’s challenge to us in this text is literally to let the “scales” fall from our eyes. Can we judge life according to a different set of scales than worldly weights and measures, or dollars and cents, or stocks and bonds?

What are we called to do? How are we to respond?

Consider our Prayer Shawl ministry. It is an active ministry of over 30 knitters many who gather at the church every Tuesday afternoon to knit and for prayer and fellowship. This group has been meeting for almost two years. The idea was suggested to Pat Johnson by our Business Manager, Herb Smyers. Pat, who is a hospitality minister

⁴ Source unknown

⁵ “Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living” by Peter J. Gomes, p. 204

⁶ Mark 12: 44; from the translation “The Message” by Eugene Peterson

always brings her knitting and as she sits at the reception desk, in between telephone calls, she knits up a storm. Herb said to Pat one day, why don't you start a prayer shawl ministry? Herb's told her about the prayer shawl ministry at his church in Western Springs.

Pat called the Western Springs Presbyterian Church to learn about their ministry and she presented the idea to other knitters. She and Peggy Koschmann started the group in June of 2004. Prayer shawls, lap robes, and scarves are knit by the group for people who have asked for prayers for themselves or for others, and the group identifies others as well— a shawl, a lap robe, or a scarf is knit in their name. The group prays for the person, and then a deacon, pastor, or Stephen minister personally presents the prayer shawl along with a card signed by the group. In the course of the two years the Prayer Shawl ministry group has knitted and presented over 200 prayer shawls.

What are we called to do? How are we to respond?

Consider Todd Luke's ministry in the Yucatan. Todd is Ruth Luke's son; Ruth as many of you know is the Director of the church's pre-school. Todd has been a lay missionary in the Yucatan since 1996. For the past two summers Sara Gunderson and her two small children have gone on a mission trip to work with Todd in Xpuhul (sh-poo-heel), Mexico. Graham Lane, who is now a freshman in college, while in High School went twice (2003 & 2004) and Steve Sawle (Saul) and his wife Cornelia and their three children were there for a week this past Christmas. Each wrote about their experience as transformative in so many ways.

Graham wrote that his experience of working with the children was something that he "will cherish forever."

Sara wrote: "It is my plan to make mission work a part of our family and my hope that by doing so our children will be a little more tolerant, a little more flexible, and a little less frustrated when things are beyond their control."

Steve wrote that last Christmas that as a family they "decided to turn their Christmas of receiving into one of pure giving." He concludes by

saying: “we thoroughly enjoyed our ‘giving Christmas’ and better understood the way most people live. We have a better appreciation of the gifts we all enjoy every day.”

On Monday April 10th the Mission committee is presenting a Mexican Fiesta dinner to meet Todd Luke. The Gunderson’s and the Sawle families will be there. They will all talk about their experiences. We are all invited to hear more about opportunities for work trips and hands-on mission experiences.

We are called to concentrate on other people’s needs and not to worry about our own needs. We are able to do so, believing in a good and faithful God who provides for us, who promises us daily bread. We all have resources to share, such as: education, experience, money, and social power.

Perhaps even more important, we as people of privilege need to be in relationship with people who are impoverished. We need them to expose to us that something is deeply wrong. We need them to move us toward a confession that we indeed are poor, and we all too often care only for ourselves.

We need interaction and relationships with those who are poor right here in Lake County and Chicago, so that these interactions might produce in us what Martin Luther King called “creative tensions” that unsettledness that leads to awareness and actions who goal is peace, justice and reconciliation.

We see this happening with PADS, North Shore Tutoring, Soup Kitchen, The Night Ministry, Habitat for Humanity, our High School Youth Work Trip, Hope Church, and the many other places that our Deacons, young people, and other members are involved.

As we act we are not alone – God is with us; God’s power and grace is present at all times. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus the Christ to show us how to care for and minister to the poor.

How do you measure your life? What scales are you using? Are you using the scales of love to measure life? What would happen if you

began to measure your life by the acts of love that filled it? Would you find yourself "rich" or "poor"?

As Christians, we are recipients of the greatest gift of love ever given, the sacrificial gift of Jesus Christ.

As we gather around the communion table today, we come from a place of poverty, yet we are rich beyond imagination; we come to the table remembering Christ gift of love, forgiveness, and eternal salvation.

Can we, like the poor widow, find the courage to share the wealth we hold?

Can we stop dribbling out our stores of love, sacrifice, and compassion? And dare to pour out our whole heart, our whole being, our "whole life" into the love-starved treasure chest of this world?

As God's "called out people" may we continue to strive to discover what it means to give our whole life to serving the Lord! **Amen!**