

Small change (Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44)

I remember seeing Helena, a widow, unfolding a \$20 bill to put in the offering plate. I knew that her family was selling its possessions to pay the ransom for her only son, imprisoned by guerrillas.

by [Maria Teresa Palmer](#) in the [October 31, 2006](#) issue

The story of the widow's mite offers a profound contrast between two types of temple worshipers. But we often misinterpret the reason for Christ's comparison. He is not preaching a lesson in personal piety and sacrificial giving—although pastors like to use this story during stewardship campaigns. It is critical that we hear instead an indictment of the preference we show to the rich and successful. In Jesus' time as today, worshipers were assigned worth according to what they could do for the temple. Prominent "teachers of the law" were seen as assets, while poor widows were a definite burden.

Although we as church leaders are proud to count prominent teachers of the law as church members, Jesus tells us that it is the poor widow who is fulfilling her calling and is showing the right relationship to God.

I think of my first visit to an American church back in the 1970s, when I was an exchange student. I came from a very conservative Catholic background and was not used to lay participation in worship. When I heard the pastor ask, "Brother ___, will you lead us in prayer for the offering?" I felt that the pastor was using the opportunity to publicly acknowledge the importance of a particular church member. I remember being a little embarrassed; I heard echoes of the Pharisee's prayer in the temple (Luke 18:10-14), a sort of litany of privilege which sounded to me like: "Thank you that we are citizens of this great country. Thank you that we have good jobs that pay ten times what the rest of the world makes so that we can bring this bountiful offering."

I still feel somewhat embarrassed by those prayers. I want to amend them by standing up and adding: "Forgive us for taking our good jobs for granted and doing so little to secure living wages for all your children. Forgive us for enjoying our luxurious church building while so many of your children feel unwelcome and unworthy to even come in."

I am also embarrassed by the titles that we flaunt in church. For example, I cringe when I recall a service of dedication for a seminary professor's baby. The bulletin listed the names of babies and parents in what seemed to be their order of importance, starting with "Amy Marie, the child of Dr. and Dr. ____." There is a thin line between affirming church members and putting value signs on them. Why do we introduce visitors and new members by their job titles and degrees? What title do we give to a poor, unemployed widow? Could this lack of sensitivity be the reason she is not joining our worship?

I served for nine years as pastor of a mission church. My transient and poor-immigrant congregation couldn't meet the denominational expectation of our becoming a self-supporting church. At best, on a Sunday there might be six or eight adults who could read well enough to help in the liturgy. Some needed glasses—a luxury for new immigrants. Others were illiterate or lacked self-confidence. One man liked to stay close to the back door "in case immigration police come." Most felt inadequate and undeserving. These worshipers brought little that the various denominations can quantify in reports.

A fellow pastor, whose ministry at a shelter reaches many battered women and many children, confided to me that she doctors her reports, counting as offering money the honoraria and donations she has received through speaking engagements. She doesn't want the viability of her church or her members' faithfulness to come into question. She shields those who need the love of God. She wants the offering reports to reflect what she and I know the worshipers are bringing: more than they can afford, given out of profound thankfulness to God. I remember seeing Helena, a widow, unfolding a \$20 bill to put in the offering plate. I knew that at the same time her family was having to sell its possessions to pay the ransom for her only son, imprisoned by guerrillas in Colombia.

All too often we turn these "poor widows" away. Some Anglo churches evict their poor Hispanic mission congregations; some denominational leaders are slow to advocate in behalf of newly homeless congregations. Our leaders tend to focus on

church planting that is *viable*: churches get started in wealthy subdivisions full of professionals who can give out of their abundance and pray eloquently. These churches are solvent and have wonderful programs, but their members may be excluding and even exploiting the poor.

As I go to court with poor immigrants, visit their children in schools and translate for them in job interviews, I am always struck by how much social capital I have by simply being able to speak English well and to work as a professional in the community. The immigrants are poor in voice and status. May God forgive me when I feel that I am of more value to the kingdom. May God forgive us, his churchpeople, for using our social capital to attract to our churches those who are powerful and rich while we ignore those who might seem a burden—those whose humble worship surely pleases God.