

The last coin

Here's to all the people who give their last coin.

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Here's to all the people who give their last coin.

Brian, my husband and the co-director of Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center, got a text message late at night. I didn't get all the details. I just know that there was an addict who was overdosing at a crack house somewhere in Atlanta. The person needed a pastor.

Brian was a couple of hours away from the city, so he called up another pastor to see what she could do. She couldn't do anything, because she was at a bus stop, helping a homeless person get shelter. I smiled, shook my head and said, "It figures she'd be helping someone else in the middle of the night."

I know what they tell us in seminary about boundaries. Professors would shake their heads at a minister helping someone at a bus stop in the middle of the night. No one would say that it is advisable to go to a crack house. That said, I'm incredibly thankful that there is a strong and solid network of people whom we can count on to do this sort of work on a daily basis. The pastors work in prisons, teaching theology between bars to women in orange jumpsuits. They hold services under bridges for people who don't feel comfortable walking into church sanctuaries. They support sex workers as they transition out of their professions.

Oddly enough, they are rarely the people who keynote at conferences about poverty or the ones on CNN pontificating about social justice. They often do the service without fanfare or recognition. Sometimes they resent the fact that they're not the ones with the spotlight on them, because they know what they're talking about more than the experts.

And they get annoyed at living in poverty so they can help poor people. We can usually find them shelling out their last coin so a homeless person can have some food. They go into debt in order to do the work. They don't like being broke any more than the rest of us do, but when the irritation flares up, they usually go back to listening, caring, and struggling until they forget about the aggravation.

When I come to this week's passage from Mark, I sit next to Jesus and watch the crowd of people giving to the treasury. I see the widow, wondering what motivates her to give her two last copper coins. Where does this extraordinary sense of generosity come from? How did she learn to give, even to the detriment of her survival?

Then I look around and I see the pastor in Atlanta, the seminary students in debt, and the elderly on fixed incomes. I remember the homeless man sharing his blanket and the panhandler splitting the contents of her cup. I watch people giving up their last coins, their midnight hours, and their exhausted bit of energy in extraordinary acts of courage and generosity. They have given everything, without any brass plaques announcing their sacrifice or any applause for their service. There has been no banquet in honor of their remarkable acts.

But this passage gives me hope. Maybe their goodness is celebrated after all.