

Why is the widow poor? (Mark 12:38-44)

So many stewardship sermons use the woman of Mark 12—lamentably—as an example of the kind of generosity to which we all should aspire.

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November 8, 2024

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Consider how often the Bible talks about widows, who were among the most vulnerable members of society. Theirs were the days before State Farm or Mutual of Omaha, before there would be insurance payouts to cover the bills in the event of your spouse's death. The inheritance that might go to a surviving spouse today would normally go to the sons back then, and the widow would then be expected to go to live with her oldest son and his family and have them provide for her until she died.

However, if she had no sons, or if her sons were too young to take on that responsibility, then she was at the mercy of society. While already sad, the death of one's husband created real threat and vulnerability for a widow. This is why the Bible talks so much about them.

The story of the widow who puts her last two coins in the temple coffers during the Passover festival comes along in the lectionary just in time for stewardship season for many churches. This year, it also comes right after a consequential election in the United States. The contrast between this widow and the other givers in the Mark

12 text seems resonant in this time, when so much money has been poured into the democratic enterprise by both corporations with deep pockets and grassroots donors who gave what little they could. The competition for our generosity has been fierce lately.

I've lost count of how many stewardship sermons I've heard that have—lamentably—used this woman as an example of the kind of generosity to which we all should aspire. Somewhere along the line, I began to doubt the pastoral sensitivity of such a message. Suggesting one should give until one can't give anymore doesn't seem very caring. The people have needs. They have to navigate an economy that isn't often favorable to them. They have to, as the theme song to one of my favorite sitcoms says, keep their heads above water and make a way when they can.

As most of our church members and neighbors can attest, the power structure demands far more from the average person than it does of the person of great means. Warren Buffet is regularly at the top of *Forbes* list of philanthropic givers. Over his lifetime, he's given around \$3 billion of his own money to various charitable causes. Yet that's approximately 38 percent of his total lifetime earnings—proportionately far less than the widow in our story. And, according to ProPublica, Buffet's tax rate is calculated at a mere one-tenth of a percent. Contrast his tax rate with that of the average person, who can expect to pay between one-quarter and one-third of our total earnings in taxes.

By lifting up the widow's actions, Jesus is not simply heaping praise on her for her generosity; he's indicting the system that keeps her poor. He's asking us to face our greed. Everyone must ask themselves some tough questions. Is this right? Why is she down to only two coins of the lowest possible denomination? How did she get here, and did we let it happen?

Bryan Stevenson famously said, "The opposite of poverty is not wealth. The opposite of poverty is justice." I pray even now that our stewardship and our civic participation have situated us closer to justice.