

The Widow's Offering Mark 12:41-44

By Allen Jorgenson and Joy Philip

presented at the Eastern Synod Assembly Saturday, June 23, 2018

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

Allen:

Many of us have heard, or perhaps used, this passage in the context of stewardship sermons, or studies: proposing that the poor widow serves as an example for us to follow. Alas, this leaves the poor widow doubly poor. She is first poor because she is bereft of money and secondly, poor because she is alienated from us. This widow who gives all becomes an impossible ideal – a reminder that we cannot and will not give up our everything, our all in service of any temple, or church, or institution, or cause. With this reading, the woman suffers both for her poverty and from her poverty. She suffers from her poverty and for her poverty. She is left with nothing but her honour, but it is an honour that condemns us, and so we grow to despise her as a reminder of our dishonour. When the passage is used in this way, it becomes an example of stewardship gone bad.

But there are other ways to read this story, ways that don't use this passage as a stick to goad us but rather as a light, a liberating light to illumine inequity, to illustrate injustice and institutional greed. Many scholars consider this teaching of Jesus to be a lament, a lament for the state of the widow and her poverty. In a way, this reading makes the most sense. After all, the bit in Mark before what we have just heard speaks of the danger of those in authority who "devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers"; Jesus warns of the threat of those in authority who are greedy for recognition, who are obsessed with reputation, who readily consume the lives of the poor. Jesus warns his hearers to be wary of those who prey on the piety of the poor, with nothing left but hope. Jesus knows that there are all too many who will readily make use of their status to rob the poor of the little that they have left. There are all too many who are glad to see the poor throw all that they have left in the treasury.

In the Greek language in which the text is written, we actually read that the widow cast her *bios* in the treasury; her *bios* – literally her very life. This invites us to imagine not two copper coins going into the treasury, but the very body and soul of the widow; her *bios* falling into the treasury. Jesus sees this because he sees from a different perspective. The text tells us that in contrast to the religious authorities who strut about in the halls of power, and who occupy the seats of honours at banquets, Jesus sat down opposite the treasury. Perhaps we can picture Jesus on the floor, watching the widow's life slipping into the coffers of the rich, her life, her *bios* consumed by the institution; perhaps we need to look down to see Jesus, looking up at the widow and looking up at us, whether we are scribe or whether we are widows.

Joy

Which begs the question: Are we, as the church, being Johann Tetzl of our time, devouring widows and the poor? I am sure you know who Johann Tetzl is. He was the papal seller of indulgences. It is believed that Tetzl's campaign ad said the following: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Was that what was happening in the temple as well? Yes, Allen, you are right, the text has too often been used to guilt people into giving but I think its time to look at it from the perspective of the postures/attitudes we take concerning the poor and the marginalized. Do we REALLY see the homeless and the poor that are our neighbours?

The theme for this assembly is liberated by grace to be neighbour. Against that backdrop, what does seeing mean? As we heard, Jesus sits down and sees the widow, a human being created in the image of God. He is not towering over her from the balcony but takes a posture where he can see beyond that which is visible to the eye. He sees the lines on her face, the heaviness in her eyes, the measured steps in her walk. But wait, he sees something else as well. Jesus sees a system, the temple, the church, stripping a widow of her life, bios, as Allen mentioned. He sees the temple budget and the tithing laws that drain the last ounce of life in her. Jesus, by the way he oriented himself or placed himself, was able to see the system that created divisions, boundaries between the rich and the poor, pure and impure, insider and outsider, pariah and paragon. The system not only created the divisions but deprived the poor even further. Jesus' seeing leads to a knowing, a compelling knowledge that emboldens him to speak and act against injustice, to challenge the oppressive system that sucked the life out of that widow. So, let us ask ourselves –what does it really mean to see the poor and homeless? What are we called to do so that we can not only see but go beyond the seeing to doing? What posture do we take so that we are emboldened to speak out against injustices to the weak and vulnerable? We are called to sit down so that we can see the homeless and widow and stare eye to eye at the oppressive and dehumanizing structures that render people homeless and lifeless. We are called to look hard at the powers that be and topple the structure and systems that consume the lives of the poor. We are called to glower at the temple priests and overturn their treasuries filled with the "bios" of the poor. We are called to orient ourselves in such a way that our church laws and budgets prioritize those and that which enhance life rather than impede life. If we do, we will no longer need food banks, soup kitchens, and shelters. The sad thing is, we need those to make us feel better about ourselves. Pathetic, isn't it? John Janovy Jr., professor of Biology at the University of Nebraska gives us an analogy that points to the importance of postures and attitudes we take. Have you seen a tiger beetle? They are beautiful creatures but swift in their movement and thus hard to catch especially for those animals that they serve as food. However, the Rocky Mountain toad soon learned that the most crucial thing in catching the tiger beetle was the posture it took. It had to lie eye to eye on the sand, get down on the same level as the beetle, before sticking out the tongue. All that was needed was to develop the approach. With the correct posture or the right approach one is enabled to not only see but also to act in such a way that brings about life as opposed to destroying life.

Allen

Joy, I heard you say that “we need food banks, soup kitchens, and shelters... we need [these things] to make us feel better about ourselves.” I hope this isn’t true! Alas, I suspect it is. And I think its true for two reasons.

First, food banks, soup kitchens and shelters and such are the by-products of the economic system that is capitalism. I remember, some years ago, going to a learning event in San Diego where the environmentalist Roger Gottlieb was presenting.¹ He spoke about 7 forces for environmental degradation and named capitalism as number one because its fundamental premise of capitalism is Grow or Die: Grow or Die. He used it to create the acronym GOD. When economic health is predicated on growth, then not to grow is to begin to die. A company that is publicly traded that does not post earnings is under suspicion. A bank that does not increase in value every year is not one that people will visit. A retirement fund that cannot provide reliable earnings on investments cannot acquire the trust of investors. That is just how it works. Our economic system is set up this way. And we are all implicated. But the downside of this is that making money always comes at the cost of taking money. Someone, it seems, is always on the losing side of the ledger called capitalism. Growth comes at a cost.

It is interesting to note that Luther wrote at the time that capitalism was beginning to emerge with the age of expansion and empire. An important tool in this expansion was usury, or the lending of money at interest. The bible is against usury, and the early and medieval church was against it as well. It was considered wrong to make money off a fellow Christian. Luther was also dead against usury and wrote a couple of tracts where he was quite adamant about the evils of usury. It is wrong to make money from money, said Luther. Lutherans, on the other hand, tend not to follow Luther on this, because we are wrapped up in, we are trapped in an economic system that is predicated on the economic premise of Grow or Die: GOD. Alas, there is something that is intrinsically, there is something that is systemically sinful about this. The Grow or Die god is an idol, a false god that counters the message of the gospel: the message of God’s unconditional embrace of all in Christ. The Grow or Die god demands mammon. Unchecked capitalism is motivated by the mantra that greed is good. Greed is the engine of growth. Thankfully, capitalism can be kept in check by governments with the will to do so, and by economic and civil society actors with a conscience. Greed can be reigned in. But this will always be a battle because growth is the condition for the possibility of capitalism as we experience it today. Growth always happens on the backs of someone, somewhere. And you can look in the faces of those “someones” in soup kitchens and such. The system needs someone to lose in order for someone to win.

But there is another need implicit in the idolatry of Grow or Die: a religious need. Humans have a God-shaped vacuum and our economic system will try to fill it with itself. Capitalism tries to capitalize on our religious need, and so it dresses itself in religious language. And so we save money, and we redeem savings bonds, and we forgive debts, and corporations have mission statements. Religious language creeps into business language for good reason: you can use religion to sell things.

¹ Roger S. Gottlieb, "Religious Environmentalism and Environmental Activism" (presentation, American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA, November 21, 2014).

But many of us know that things are not right. We know, intrinsically, that greed is NOT good. And so we need a solution to our crises of conscience. We face a religious crisis. I recognize that I am a part of the problem, and so I want to make myself right; I want to justify myself. And this is where acts of charity come in. I can feel better about who I am by helping someone else, someone in need. I can take care of guilty religious need by donating to a food bank, I can respond to the guilty religious need by helping out at a soup kitchen, by writing a cheque for this charity or that. In a way, we almost come back to Joy's reference to Tetzl. The Grow or Die god sets up a crisis of poverty, a crisis of poverty that creates a crisis of conscience that invites me to identify someone or something that I can spend my money on in order to right this wrong. I give to the poor for just that reason. Finally, I need the poor because they have become objects for my piety, my piety. They have become my indulgence.

But the gospel brooks no indulgences. The good news cannot be bought. The radical message of grace undercuts all of this. The gospel will not tolerate my using others for my religious angst. There is no room for this kind of guilty religious need in the reign of God. And yet, interestingly, the gospel does not eradicate need itself. It reformulates need. Need is born again in God's reign. The Gospel casts need in a new guise. It reminds us that need is itself a gift. The baby needs the mother's breast. This is good! The ill need the care of the nurse, the physician. This is good! The student needs the teacher and the teacher needs the student. This is too good! I know how good, and important, it is! These needs are not to be exploited, but celebrated! In the reign of God, needs are good, needs are a gift. We need each other because this very need puts us in community, in relationship.

In the gospel lesson we looked at, Jesus sits down opposite the treasury and looks at the woman, the widow, the poor widow, the widow in need. But it isn't only the widow who has need. Jesus has need of the widow, and so do we.

Joy

Interesting that you say that we, as well as, Jesus, are in need of the widow. It took me to another passage in Mark (Mk 14: 3-9).

It is the story of the unnamed woman, who could have been a widow, breaking the alabaster jar of very costly nard and anointing Jesus' feet. Of course, the self-righteous men, the disciples, cannot believe that the woman wasted all that money instead of funding the food bank or financing the soup kitchen. They render her foolish! Her act is folly because she dared to see the face of the poor and homeless man, Jesus. For the woman, the poor were not a social category that could be pushed to the back of the agenda; the homeless were not simply statistics as it is for many of us. She knew she had to address the system that created the statistics and the social category. And to address and challenge a social ill, be it of poverty or homelessness one needs to come face to face with the poor, break the alabaster jars they hold dear and use it in service to the poor. The woman did not hesitate to give up the precious nard in service of the poor man, Jesus. The men, on the other hand, would rather feel good by writing a check, preferably not they themselves, than actually seeing the face of Jesus. We all do that. We tie quilts; we fill we care bags with \$5 tied to the front to be mailed to CLWR and then CLWR sends it to "people affected by poverty or displaced by war, hunger or natural disaster."

Think about it for a minute. We have sheets and other material lying in our houses to make a quilt; we are not covering ourselves with a torn or tattered sheet. When the we care bags come from CLWR, we pick up some along with the list from the narthex of the church, go to Superstore or Walmart and fill the bags; we really don't feel the pinch. But, it makes us feel good about ourselves to think that we are helping the poor and homeless people over there in Haiti or the Congo. The thing is, we do not see them; we do not have to see them. They are statistics for us. And, as Jesus said, they will always be there **until and unless we see them face to face** and see the face of Jesus like the woman did. If we did, we cannot but break free of those alabaster jars that hold us captive.

So, yes, you are right, Allen, we need people like the unnamed woman and the widow to jolt us out of our self-righteousness, complacencies and condescension. Of course, food banks, soup kitchens, and we care bags are good. However, should we not wonder why we still have food banks and soup kitchens? What does that say about us as a church, as individuals, as communities? What are we not doing?" What are the alabaster jars we are holding on to that needs to be broken? Who and what are we not seeing?

Now, let us go back and look at the widow once again. She knows that the temple laws and the line item in the temple budget are not on her side. She does not know what tomorrow brings. But that does not stop her. Look closely at her hands! Observe the gesture with which she opens her hands. There is no hesitation; she lets go of those last precious coins, does not even wait to hear it fall in the offering plate. She does not stay back to get a receipt for taxes nor does she say that the coins were to go to the women's auxiliary. She simply opens her hands and lets go of the coins. **She is free!** She does not buy into the Johann Tetzels of our times. She knows she is free. As Allen mentioned in the beginning, this story is not meant to guilt people into giving. It is a call to see beyond the visible, it is about a seeing that leads to doing. **It is about freedom!** This poor widow knew what it meant to be free and in that gesture of letting go of those coins she models freedom for us.

Luther said, "The Christian is perfectly free, subject to none. The Christian is perfectly bound, subject to all." It is a claim for unbounded freedom and radical commitment to the neighbor and all of creation. And, that is just what the widow by her gesture proclaims to us. She gives her all, her bios, not for the temple treasury **but for her neighbour**. She knows that she is free, liberated by grace to be a neighbour! Freedom is a word that disrupts the domain of finance and treasury. It is not about investment, but a divestment where "power divests itself in weakness, in which Wisdom gave herself as foolishness."² And, my, oh my, did that widow know that! The question is: Do we know that? Do we know that we are free in faith and bound to our neighbor in love! If not, isn't it high time that we orient ourselves, maybe sit down as Jesus did, so that we are enabled to see, to know and to act.

Questions:

What posture/s are we called to take so we can better see our neighbours?

Is it hard to imagine Jesus being in need? Why? Or Why not?

What institutional presuppositions are we called to lament and challenge?

² Vitor Westhelle, Class lecture, Systematic Theology 1, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Fall 2001.