



## *Imitate God's Generosity*

*Mark 12:38-44*

*As he taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets.*

*They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely."*

*Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.*

*They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."*

*November 8, 2015*

## **Thought for the Week**

Our grandparents remembered how things were when they came of age: "Sure, they were poor. Everybody was poor," they used to say. In the 1930s and '40s cash on hand was rare, and luxuries few. Lots of kids picked cotton at summer's end to supplement the family income. But, they said, "we always had enough to eat." Like most of their neighbors, they owned their own land, grew their own vegetables, and some raised animals for their meat and eggs.

Our grandparents remembered the honorable poverty of days long past. In our day ordinary people so fear poverty that we avoid the subject altogether. Millions of us make more than enough money to get by, but we also know that we're just one layoff, one medical crisis, or one accident away from joining the ranks of the poor. If we lose our good jobs and wind up seeking entry-level or wage employment, many of us will find it impossible to keep paying those mortgages. Poverty lurks for all of us and, it's said that, half of all Americans will face poverty before they turn 65.

Those of us who cling to our middle-class status are more likely to go to church than are the truly poor, so we allow ourselves to imagine poor people as being somehow different. As a result, we need help recognizing poverty's presence.

Here's the deal: Jesus didn't allow his listeners to forget about the poor. At one level, it was impossible to do so. Nearly everyone in the ancient world lived in poverty; but often they lived in dire poverty. Jesus' world included few wealthy people, a few people finding ways to make money and accumulate wealth, lots of people scratching a living off the land, and lots of people living on the margins of the economy. Jesus, the Gospels tell us, moved among the poor. He told stories (we call them parables) about rich landowners and their poor and enslaved laborers. He warned the rich that they faced God's judgment, while he demonstrated compassion by feeding the masses that followed him out into the wilderness.

Our determination to turn our eyes from poverty leads to perverted interpretation. In Mark 12:38-44 Jesus calls attention to a poor widow. She contributes two copper coins to the temple treasury, "her whole livelihood" according to the Greek, and Jesus judges her contribution as greater than the large sums contributed by the rich.

When church budget time rolls around, countless preachers call their congregations to emulate this poor widow by increasing their annual giving.

The poor widow definitely exemplifies sacrificial giving, but you shouldn't turn her story into a general example. Mark's Gospel goes out of its way to make clear that she is just as much a victim as a hero.

The most important hint lies in the context Mark provides. The poor widow's story does not stand alone. Instead, it follows Jesus' condemnation of the scribes who run the very temple to which she contributes. "Watch out for the scribes," Jesus says. They're all about themselves and their status. But Jesus goes on: "They devour widows' houses." Having said this, Jesus immediately calls attention to one of those widows who has nothing left. Many preachers read only the widow's story without Jesus' condemnation of the scribes. The two stories belong together, the one story telling us how to read the other.

A second clue also involves the passage's context. The widow places her two coins into the temple treasury, but immediately after her appearance, Mark tells us that Jesus' disciples express wonder at the glorious temple. Having prophesied the temple's destruction Jesus then sits "opposite the temple" (13:1-3). So Jesus does not commend the temple! Rather, Jesus has just observed the temple donations, the widow's included, from "opposite the treasury" (12:41). Mark is a careful writer, repeating key phrases as commentary on events as they occur. Jesus does not recommend donating to the temple, for he regards its leaders as corrupt and exploitative.

Finally, we might ask ourselves a simple question. Does Jesus seem like the kind of teacher who wants poor people, especially vulnerable widows, to give away their very last resources? Do we seriously imagine Jesus as rejoicing when a widow's generosity deprives her of "her whole livelihood"? I hardly think so.

The widow's generosity places the reality of poverty before our eyes. It reminds us that the poor do not represent parasites that drain society of its resources. This story reminds us that we live in an economy that siphons its resources upward and leaves the vulnerable to face destitution on their own. Do we inhabit churches that ignore the process? Whether our institutions and religious leaders recognize it or not, we have lots to learn from the poor and the vulnerable. All we have to do is look.

*Happy Birthday- Tammera (11/8) & Roger (11/8)*

## **Prayer for Peace - Burundi**

We praise you, Lord God, for all people in their daily lives and work, for our families, friends and those who enrich our lives. Guide us as we strive to live in ways that reflect your love for all creation.

Forgive us for the choices we make which separate us from you and from one another. Renew us with your spirit of grace and peace.

We pray for this community, the nations, and the world. Today we uphold for your blessing the people of Burundi. Guide their leaders to find peaceful solutions to conflict. Bless the people as they seek to reconcile and heal the wounds from years of war and as they work to rebuild their country.

We seek your blessing of peace for the special needs and concerns of those gathered here. Help us reach beyond our own comfort to meet the needs of those who suffer from injustices of poverty, violence and oppression. May your light and hope shine through us as we strive to be instruments of your peace.

We pray, O God, that your peace may become the peace of this world. Amen.

## **Stewardship Thought**

*"I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."*

*(Mark 12:43-44)*

Jesus gets right to the point – we are all called to give money to support the mission of the Church, regardless of our circumstance. No gift is too small or insignificant!

Giving money to support the mission of our local parish is a matter of our faith, just like praying and participating in parish ministries. When you make a financial offering, is it from your “first fruits” or from what is “left over”?