

11.11.2018
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Introduction

In today's text we see a familiar sight: privileged people with power discussing matters of import. Alongside them is a person in the distress of poverty, and in poverty is giving coppers to places that the wealthy benefit from, but do not contribute to.

'The Widow's Mite' is often used as a way of recognising the generosity of the poor, calling on those who have little to nonetheless give the little they have for the payback of recognition. There is — or at least, may be — virtue in this reading. However, for today's reflection we are going to troubled the regularly received wisdom of this reading, causing some conflict of interpretation of the text.

What if she wasn't doing a great thing, this widow. What if she was a victim of those who stood idly by, seeing the evidence that their distance created, but doing nothing to intervene. Perhaps Jesus wanted someone to put their hand into the treasury box, remove some coins, and give them back to her, from whom much had already been taken.

Text

Mark 12:38–44

As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then 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. For 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."

Comment

In today's text we see a familiar sight: privileged people with power discussing matters of import. Alongside them is a person in the distress of poverty, and in poverty is giving coppers to places that the wealthy benefit from, but do not contribute to.

'The Widow's Mite' is often used as a way of recognising the generosity of the poor, calling on those who have little to nonetheless give the little they have for the payback of recognition. There is — or at least, there may be — virtue in this reading. However, for today's reflection we are going to troubled the regularly received wisdom of this reading, causing some conflict of interpretation of the text.

Regular reception of this text implies that she's praised:

- Because she gave all, she's praised.
- Because she gave until she had little — or nothing — left, she's praised.
- Because of the spirit in which she gave she's praised.
- Give according to your means, and she did this, so she's praised.
- Give until it hurts; she did this, and is praised.

However, this automatic assumption of praise of the widow is problematic.

Reading Jesus' words again:

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For 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."

we see no indication of praise. Certainly Jesus isn't condemning her, but he isn't praising her either. He's noticing her. And he's noticing her in the context of having just said:

"...they devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

We have here the harsh language of Jesus towards those in power who devour the houses of widows, in the name of their great appearance.

So the point of this text isn't to say that the widow is doing a great thing, but that the authorities are doing awful things. It is possible to read this text through the lens of proclaiming that she was a victim of those who stood idly by, seeing the evidence that their distance created, but doing nothing to intervene. Perhaps Jesus wanted someone to put their hand into the treasury box, remove some coins, and give them back to her, from whom much had already been taken.

This widow is not setting an example to be imitated; but neither are the authorities.

In this context we see Jesus exacerbating conflict: building it up, seeing something that's received as a demonstration of the 'generosity of the poor' and reading the deeper truth of exploitation beneath the received narrative. The widow has been asked to give the little she has to something that is going to fail, and she does this, to the betterment of the already bettered, and the detriment of her meagre finances. This is a failure of moral authority, as well as pragmatism.

Often it seems in circles of faith that we are moved towards deescalating conflict; when in this text we see Jesus escalating it, amplifying it in the civic conversation, rather than hiding it. This

She is not praised, she is not to be imitated. She is a warning to leaders that they need to consider the dark side of the devotion they evoke. The power of their words can make the poor poorer, and make them think that this is something praiseworthy, when in fact such civic manipulations in the name of religion are condemnable not commendable.

This reading of the text has been influenced by the article "The Widow's Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context" by Addison G. Wright, Priest at Society of St. Sulpice (Catholic Biblical Quarterly 44 [1982]).

Response

In certain circles of Christianity, we see a romanticisation of the term 'poor'. We hear of people taking vows of poverty, and people who embrace poverty as a lifestyle.

The text here suggests that Jesus does not think poverty is a lifestyle choice, and that those who can choose it are not choosing poverty, but rather the appearance of it, perhaps at the expense of those who are in actual poverty; poverty they wish to climb out of, not be trapped in.

Explore the texts of devotion you use — consider where there may be a romantic version of poverty being suggested, and consider what a gospel intervention that raises tension about the value about such romanticism may be.

Prayer

Disrupting Jesus,

where others saw devotion

you sometimes saw destruction.

Disrupting Jesus, disrupt us.

Open our minds to the ways in which we

congratulate ourselves

while constricting others

in lifestyles we would never tolerate.

Because you demand love, not abuse.

And in your name we seek freedom

– or at least repentance –

and never enslavement.

Amen.