

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

November 8, 2009

What Can We Learn From Them?

Thirty Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 12:38-44

The Chicago *Sun-Times* carried the story several weeks ago about a pastor in the southern suburbs who's hit on a way to increase attendance and giving at his church. During each Sunday service he has a raffle for a \$250 prize. The money is kept in a cash-filled lockbox that hangs over the pulpit. "If the 'Price is Right' theme is played during the service, the prize doubles to \$500," the article states. I don't know what that means, but empty pews are disappearing at the church, attendance is topping 2,000 a week, and Sunday mornings now see traffic jams on Cicero Avenue where the church is located. Plus, donations which had typically been less than \$25,000/week have been running closer to \$40,000 weekly since the raffles began. The pastor is quoted as saying, "It is totally gimmicky. I make no bones about that, but if I could get someone who would not normally come to church, why not?"

If a simple raffle brings out a few hundred extra worshippers a week to their church, I'm sure we could come up with something better here! Perhaps we can feed some suggestions to our worship committee. How about mud wrestling on the

first and third Sunday of the month and free beer on the second and fourth? Those things tend to bring out a crowd, too. At least we'd be giving them a show, and not playing off the vulnerabilities of desperate people in a down economy. I'd just have to assume that a lot of people sitting in the pews of that other church have a dire need for that \$250.

Do you think Jesus might have just a word or two to say about any of this? On a day long ago, he is standing with his disciples outside of the Jerusalem temple. The prosperous, the well-connected, the successful crowd is lining up to pay their temple tax. In their gilded robes, they create quite a scene as they make exaggerated gestures so that everyone will notice that they are contributing a significant amount to the treasury. No doubt, the disciples' attention is riveted by the spectacle of it all: this extravagant display of wealth, this parade of riches.

But, that is not what Jesus is looking at. He spots something else, or rather someone else whom the others miss. He wants them to notice her, too, a poor widow who places two small copper coins into the box. "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."

So often this widow, offering her meager, though costly, contribution is lifted up as an example of deep piety and commitment. Pastors will often choose

this passage for a sermon on stewardship. “See, what an outstanding example of giving! This poor woman gave in a sacrificial way; that’s what you should do, too.” But, in the context of the passage, Jesus seems less interested in commending her piety than in regretting her credulity while pointing out the extra burdens that often fall upon the poor.

She “put in . . . all she had to live on.” That is not a good thing. King Herod does not need those two pennies to make his temple even more extravagant. The scribes and temple attendants do not need her small gift to live in ever greater comfort. They are already doing quite well. Of course, Jesus has a comment or two to say about them. “They like to walk around in long robes . . . 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 devour widows’ houses,” Jesus says. Then, we observe an example of how they do it, taking advantage of a poor, old lady, alone in the world, who lacks enough even to support herself. But, they will take that if they can, and they will do or say whatever is necessary to get it.

Preying on the vulnerable. Taking advantage of the weak. They are the leaders of the temple, but Jesus exposes them as little more than the confidence men of his day. They defy the norms of fair play and justice; they deserve condemnation. Both then, and now.

Our newspapers are filled with such stories. Of ill-gotten gain. The outright liars, thieves, and dirty tricksters who've made a bundle at the expense of the rest of us. We've seen our share of Ponzi schemes and crazy swindles that have gone bad, but the rot has infected more than what lies outside of the law. These charlatans run the payday loan scams which suck the life from poor families. For a profit, they import substandard products from China which endanger our health or the health of our children. As the captains of some of the largest corporations in America, they siphon off capital needed for innovation, fire their workers, and steal from the shareholders, all to enrich themselves. Then they march to Washington with cash in hand and make their plea to legislators who are all too ready to help themselves to a piece of the action. "Regulation," they piously proclaim, "that is un-American."

If my words seem unusually strong, then you've not been listening to what Jesus has to say to those who take advantage of others. "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Jesus wants to direct our attention away from the rich and what they are doing to see the poor and what is happening to them.

A few years ago, through my duties on a Presbytery Committee on Preparation for Ministry, I had quite a few conversations with a young seminarian who spent a year in India on a fellowship. When he returned, it was obvious that he had been much changed by the experience. He told me about many of the things he had seen, the people he interacted with, and how his understanding of ministry had been challenged to the core. In particular, he described how he spent at least some time on most of his days there visiting and playing chess with a group of disabled men who were the absolute poorest of the poor. He said, “I would ask myself what was the value of doing this almost every day. Some of the men were missing arms or legs or an eye. They were all missing teeth. We sat in the shade of a tree while we played. I couldn’t communicate well with them either, because there wasn’t much English in the conversation. I kept wondering if there wasn’t something else that would be a better use of my time: some theology book I ought to be reading, some church program I ought to be developing, some sermon I ought to be writing.”

“Did you ever find an answer?” I asked him.

“I’m still working on it,” he said, but I think he already knew. We want to observe the rich, study the successful, listen to the learned, emulate the healthy, and keep our eyes on those who are young and attractive. But, there is more to be learned from those who are none of these things.

Tony Campolo, the popular preacher and seminary professor, tells a great story about a dirty, homeless man he encountered in downtown Philadelphia. Campolo is a jovial man; his stories are often filled with laughter, and this one is no different.

As Campolo approached him on a street corner, the man yelled out, “Hey mister, ya want some coffee?” Let me tell the story in the first person now as Campolo told it.

I have to admit that I really didn’t want to take the coffee. But I knew the right thing to do was to accept his generosity, and so I said, “Sure, I’ll take a sip.” As I handed the cup back to him I said, “You’re getting pretty generous, aren’t you, giving away your coffee? What’s gotten into you today that’s made you so generous?”

The old derelict looked straight into my eyes and said, “Well... the coffee was especially delicious today, and I figured if God gives you something good, you ought to share it with people!”

I thought to myself, *Oh man. He has really set me up! This is going to cost me five dollars!* So I asked him, “I suppose there’s something I can do for you in return, isn’t there?”

The bum answered, “Yeah, you can give me a hug!” (To tell the truth, I was hoping for the five dollars!) He put his arms around me and I put my arms

around him. Then suddenly I realized something. He wasn't going to let me go! People were passing us on the sidewalk. They were staring at me. There I was dressed in establishment garb, hugging this dirty, filthy bum! I was embarrassed. I didn't know what to do.

Then, little by little, my embarrassment changed — to awe and reverence. And I heard a voice echoing down the corridors of time saying, “I was hungry. Did you feed me? I was naked. Did you clothe me? I was sick. Did you care for me? I was a bum on Chestnut street... Did you hug me? For if you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.”<sup>1</sup>

All of these things begin with seeing, seeing what is really going on in the world. Not looking away, but noticing what others have missed. “See that poor widow, and what she has done!” Jesus says to his disciples. There is something important to be learned from her.

Who do you need to see, and what will you learn from them?

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<sup>1</sup> From Dr. Tony Campolo's keynote address at the Montreat Collegiate Conference, January 2-5, 2009.