

Rich or Poor

The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Kings 17:8-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

During the Great Depression in America, a government agency had the responsibility of traveling through rural areas in search of poor farmers, to whom they would give grant monies for seed purchases or for repair of homes and barns. One agent arrived at the shack of an old woman. The shack had no floor. Some of its windows were broken and covered with tar paper to keep out the cold. It was apparent this elderly woman had hardly any basic essentials, yet she persisted in trying to eke out a living on her small plot of land. The agent introduced himself and asked, "If the government gave you \$200, what would you do with it?" The woman's response came immediately. She said, "I'd give it to the poor."

Was that woman in denial about her own needs? No. She, of anyone, was well aware of what she possessed and what she lacked. She probably farmed that land for years through drought, dustbowl, and deluge. Yet she was able to see beyond her own needs to someone else's greater need. And she was willing to do something about it.

So was the widow who came to the temple. Now, don't suppose for one minute she was in denial about her needs, either. She, of anyone, knew what she possessed and what she lacked. She was, after all, a widow in a culture where widows had little status. In fact, she was a poor widow, we are told, which meant that the familial umbrella that should protect her was not there. See, a widow had to rely on the benevolence of her children (if she had any), or the family she was born into (if they'd take her back following the death of her husband). If those connections didn't provide her with some financial security, then she was at the mercy of any compassion society might offer her, any charity the religious establishment might extend to her. Not that she could **expect** that compassion and charity, but, as a Jewish woman, she would have known that the Law—the covenant the Lord God made with Israel—and the word God gave to his prophets both stipulated that widows were to be protected. Widows, along with orphans and strangers who wandered in the land, were to be treated justly and compassionately. Oh, yes, I'm certain that poor widow knew Law and prophet both demanded God's people care for the poor.

But the reality was that care wasn't happening. You can see it in the situation of this widow. For she approaches the temple with exactly two tiny coins to her name—two *lepta*. The *lepta* was the smallest coin in the Jewish monetary system. They are everything she owns. Not anywhere near what it would take to sustain the widow for one day. Not anywhere near what it would take to sustain **anybody** for one day. Yet she drops both tiny copper coins into the temple treasury. Why should she? The religious institution of her day and faith has failed her. It has failed to protect her and provide for her. It has failed to obey God's explicit commands to care for her. The temple doesn't deserve her money. Don't you see what Jesus' words in this lesson are leading us to see? That her tiny offering, which bankrupts her, will simply go to perpetuate a system which exploited the poor and the destitute in order to finance the luxury and status of the religious leaders Jesus just condemned a few verses earlier. In fact, by pointing out this poor widow's actions, Jesus further condemns those scribes.

But Jesus' words lead us to see still more, to see beyond the temple treasury and the religious institution and the pretentiousness of the scribes. The widow wasn't really giving her offering to the temple treasury. Well, technically that's where her offering went. But the widow actually was giving her two tiny coins to God. She came to the temple, but she could see beyond the temple. She came to the temple to show her love for the Lord God. She did so because, in spite of the religious institution's failings, her faith in the Lord as a mighty God, her faith in him as a just and compassionate God, compelled her to respond to him for everything he had done for her and her people. She obeys the command to love the Lord her God with all her heart, soul, mind and strength. She also obeys that other command—to love her neighbor and share what she has with them. So she empties her savings in order to fulfill, in however small and insignificant a way—both commands. The widow gives all she has to the One she trusts will sustain her life. She gives out of her poverty because she already considers herself rich.

Now, the other widow in our stories—the widow of Zarephath—discovers the same thing, but first she had to be convinced by the prophet Elijah to share her food with him. She was reluctant, to say the least. Poor, struggling, realizing that in the midst of extreme famine in the land she's about to prepare a final meal for her son and herself, she's not willing to feed Elijah, too. Elijah has to work mighty hard to get her to do so. Elijah has to lead her to see beyond the handful of meal and the little bit of oil, and look to God in faith. So she does; she places her trust in the words of the Lord coming from Elijah's mouth—words that declare the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day God brings rain to end the famine. She trusts that word, feeds Elijah, and experiences an ongoing sustenance that she could never have imagined. The widow of Zarephath gives her all, believing God can be trusted with all. And she learns God **is** faithful and just and compassionate.

Those two widows show us where to place our trust. Only it's going to take some convincing, isn't it? Because we tend to place our trust in human-made things. Look, we've just come out of election time, where we've heard a myriad of promises from candidates of all political persuasions. We want to believe those promises, and we based our vote on those promises. We're trusting the candidates who made them. Some of those promises will be fulfilled. But soon, all too soon, some of our elected leaders will disappoint us, will fail to serve as promised. Don't place your trust there.

Or, how about this? We're entering a season of the year where advertisers persuade us to purchase things in order to make ourselves happy, in order to satisfy our wants and desires. We'll be drawn into that consumer mode, and when it's all over, except for the credit card bills yet to be paid, we'll find ourselves let-down and disappointed, our purchases failing to satisfy quite the way they promised. Don't place your trust there.

What more convincing do we need than Jesus' words and Jesus' actions? For immediately following this story of the widow at the temple, Jesus, while talking with his disciples, predicts that the temple itself will be destroyed. Its imposing stone façade, its coffers of money, its representation of power and wealth—gone. Stone upon stone tossed in a heap. Don't place your trust there, suggests Jesus to his disciples. Place your trust in me. God will fulfill his promises to his people through me.

God **can** be trusted with **all**—our money, our hearts, our gifts, our world's troubles, our own individual worries and weaknesses. He can be trusted with all because he first gives all. The widow and her gift at the temple treasury serve as symbol, foreshadowing Jesus our Lord who will give his all on the cross in order to take our impoverished, disappointed selves and make us rich. Rich in him, rich with his life and love, rich enough to share. **AMEN.**