

(Mark 12:38-44 NRSV)

³⁸ 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, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ 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. ⁴⁴ 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."

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A Complicated Lesson

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Mark 12:38-44

This morning's story is a familiar one. It is often referred to as the story of the widow's mite. The King James Bible says that the widow placed two mites in the treasury. Our modern translations call them simply small copper coins, but the name has stuck. The widow's mite. And the widow has become a familiar hero because she put everything she had into the treasury, all she had to live on.

I wonder, however, if that is the point Jesus really wanted us to take from his teaching. The trouble Jesus would probably find with being Jesus, the trouble Jesus would probably find with being so highly thought of as he is today, the trouble Jesus would likely find with his very high standing is that people take him so seriously they rarely see his intentional exaggerations. Was the point Jesus was making that the right thing to do is to give everything you have to live on away?

This is not a trivial or low stakes question. Because, in fact, many have found the heart of the Christian message to be saying something like that. Jesus himself said a few chapters earlier in Mark, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:35 NRSV) And Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross is often seen as the supreme example of selfless giving. Somehow, the thinking goes, Jesus' death saved us from our sinfulness. Our own sacrifice, it would seem logical to say, could follow worse models.

Throughout Christian history, and certainly now, there are many who have questioned this way of thinking. There are many who have looked deeply into the life of Jesus and found not a cheerful sacrifice, but a weeping savior. They have found not a story of atonement whereby God required the death of his only son for human sin, but a story of human sin so deep that it could not help but murder the goodness of Jesus. The resurrection, then, was, indeed, God's statement that human iniquity would not win the day. But it was God saying that God would triumph over the crucifixion, not that God would require the crucifixion as some sort of payment of debt.

Having arrived here at the theory of atonement it may seem we have strayed a long way from the widow's mite. And in a way we have. But in another way we

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have not. For once you idealize the crucifixion, it is easy to idealize any sacrifice, even that of all the money a widow has to live on.

And so when Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury,” we may too easily draw the wrong conclusion. Jesus, like the great prophets who preceded him, was very concerned for the poor, the sick and the disenfranchised, among whom in his day were the widows, who had no husband, no real status and no social safety net to protect them. It is very unlikely that Jesus’ point in this story was that the model we should aspire to was the widow who gave everything she had to live on.

The point of the story, rather, was to contrast the widow with those very wealthy people whose giving was essentially meaningless to them. Here we find Jesus’ real concern, Jesus’ real worry. He was worried about those who walked around in long robes, those to whom everyone bowed in the marketplace. He was worried about those who always had seats of honor, whether it be in the synagogue or at the banquets. He was worried because the great sin of self-centeredness was a sin so deep and numbing that it undermined all of society. He was worried, too, because this sin of self-centeredness was so compelling and attractive that even those who followed him most closely, even James and John, his disciples, fell prey to it. You recall the favor they asked him – “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” They wanted the best seats, too!

Self-centeredness bothered Jesus more than just about anything else. Because when one puts oneself first, and not just first but puts oneself as the only real concern, then other people or other things matter very little. Jesus was not impressed by those who wore the long robes, held the highest status and were the wealthiest. He was not impressed by them even when they placed large sums in the treasury. For Jesus believed that at best their apparent generosity was a expedience and at worst they were doing it to impress people. Jesus was very certain that the grandiose were not putting the money in the treasury out of any deep commitment to or love for the whole community that God cared for. In their world someone like the widow in the story would go entirely unnoticed. So Jesus pointed to the widow as an exaggerated example of someone who gave without any thought for herself. He wasn’t suggesting that people should give everything they have. He was saying, though, that the widow cared for more than herself. Like the saying, you must give your life to gain it, Jesus was trying to make it clear that self-centeredness, no matter how successful one is, no matter how apparently generous one is, self-centeredness is a deadly deterrent to true participation in the community. For the truly self-centered, everyone else and everything else is the competition. But for the person who is participant in a common life together with others, everyone else is a brother and a sister, others’ victories are shared

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celebrations, others' sorrows are shared griefs, and others' abilities are resources for the common good.

We live in a time when Jesus' would no doubt be concerned about the level of self-centeredness in our society, would be deeply worried about the low level of commitment to the common good. Every generation for the past forty years has vied for the honor of being called the 'me' generation. Larry Bird was once asked what his favorite charity was. He answered, "The Larry Bird charity." Roger Clemens is known as Mr. Me. Bill Gates has left bodies all along the road of his journey to becoming the world's wealthiest man. And like the ones in the story, these and others like them, are among the most powerful and prestigious members of our society. They wear the robes of honor, and they are the envy of even their detractors.

But this is not merely a problem of the rich and famous. It seems to me that self-centeredness extends to nearly every quarter. There is the story of Diogenes, the citizen of ancient Athens, who walked through the city with a lantern in his hand and searched in every nook and cranny, looked under every basket and stoop, with one modest goal: Diogenes wanted to find one honest person.

I have lived in this fair city of Cambridge for nearly a score of years. I have watched, and at one level or another participated in, debates ranging from parks to shopping malls, from libraries to housing developments, from parking and traffic control to restaurants, from public schools to public buildings. And in this fair city, so known for its radically populist temperament that it is sometimes called the people's republic of Cambridge, in this fair city I have seen the language of the public good marshaled time and again for every kind of cause. But it has been my observation that almost every time people are talking about their own self-interest. There seems to exist here so little real concept of the common good, that people regularly describe what they want personally to be the common good. If I don't want a school with black kids in my neighborhood, then it is not good for the neighborhood to have a school there. If I want the property next door to remain a green space for my personal pleasure, then it is in the community's best interest to keep it so. If I don't want a new library in my back yard, it is for the common good that it should be located in Central Square.

It is not unusual for people to argue for and try to accomplish the things they want. What I find so disturbing is that there is so little idea that there exists anything else. Most every debate, even as it borrows the language of the common good, is lived out as a set of competing personal preferences. We seem to have fewer and fewer ways of describing and taking seriously the interest of the whole community. I find the rather messy situation we find the current election to be in to be a case in point. Both the Gore campaign and the Bush campaign are shouting out the clarion call for the best interests of the country. But there is little evidence

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that either side can conceptualize the good of the country much farther than imagining their own election to the presidency. What would it mean for the two campaigns to sit down and strategize the best way to approach the next several days for the real common good? I don't know. But I do know that what they are doing is not it.

Robert Putnam has written a book entitled, *Bowling Alone* (New York, Simon and Shuster, 2000). The title comes from his research, and his research indicates that while more people bowl than ever, bowling leagues have declined enormously. People are bowling alone. Now, if the problem were simply bowling, it wouldn't be of too much concern. But Putnam's research has found that over the last twenty-five years attendance at club meetings has declined by 58%. Again, clubs may not be worrisome to most of us; although, I would point out that for the purposes of this research, churches would be included in these figures. In fact, John and Sylvia Ronsvalle writing in the *Christian Century* (October 23, 1996, v. 113, issue 30, beginning p. 1010) conclude that if the trend which has been steady for the past 30 years continues, the United Church of Christ and most mainline churches will not exist 30 years from now.

But let's not dwell on our own self-interests in survival. Putnam isn't interested in just bowling and clubs. His research indicates that over the last 25 years other ways we interact with one another have declined as well. Over the last 25 years, family dinners have declined by 33%, and having friends over for dinner has declined by 45%. Said in the terms Jesus is worried about, our self-involvement has increased enormously, while participation in our common life has declined precipitously.

Putnam has drawn conclusions similar to those of Jesus. He argues that, "Much hard evidence has accumulated that civic engagement and social connectedness are practical preconditions for better schools, safer streets, faster economic growth, more effective government, and even healthier lives."

Jesus worried about an increasingly self-involved elite, which had more and more lost touch with the greater community and the community's greater good. Generations of Israelite prophets before Jesus had described such concerns in terms of their worry for a just and compassionate society. Jesus followed in their line. And so in the story of the widow's mite, it is especially significant that Jesus singles out the widow; the widow, the treatment of whom was the litmus for a good society. Jesus points to the widow and contrasts her with those who walk around in long robes and command respect. For they have lost sight of and are no longer real participants in the community of God's people. They were bowling alone. Amen.

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