

'ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON' EXTRAVAGANT GENEROSITY

PROPER 27, YEAR B

Lectionary Texts: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 I Kings 17:8-16 Psalms 127 & 146
Mark 12:38-44 Hebrews 9:24-28

Focus Text: Mark 12:38-44

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, ³⁹and 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."

NRSV

ADDITIONAL TEXTS

Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

Matthew 6:1-5

See, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice. Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. Then the eyes of those who have sight will not be closed, and the ears of those who have hearing will listen. The minds of the rash will have good judgment, and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly. A fool will no longer be called noble, nor a villain be said to be honorable. For fools speak folly, and their minds plot iniquity: to practice ungodliness, to utter error concerning the LORD, to leave the craving of the hungry unsatisfied, and to deprive the thirsty of drink. The villainies of villains are evil; they devise wicked devices to ruin the poor with lying words, even when the plea of the needy is right. But those who are noble plan noble things, and by noble things they stand.

Isaiah 32:1-8

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

BY REV. CATHY TAMSBERG, MINISTER OF
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In Mark's gospel, Jesus seems to be constantly working to get his message across to his bumbling disciples.¹ Consequently, the very simple and direct story of the widow's mite feels appropriate. Mark tells what happens and then has Jesus comment on the contributions of the rich and the poor widow to underline the contrast between the gifts of each.² This tale has parallels both in Jewish literature and that of other cultures.³ So whether these events actually happened or Jesus simply told the story in a teaching moment, he obviously wanted to make a clear point about generosity.

Jesus' attack on the scribes ("teachers of the law" in the NIV) is not just about their ambition or actions taken for show, but rather their fundamental misunderstanding of the faith. The condemnation of men who eat up the property of widows is an old one (see Isaiah 10:1-2). Wealthy women were obligated to offer hospitality to traveling teachers, which set the women up for abuse—though some commentators believe few were guilty of it.⁴ Even a few examples of it, however, were sufficient for Jesus to make the point that saying long prayers in public for the sake of appearance makes the acts of injustice particularly scandalous. A punishment more severe than that of others will await them since they use God's name to cover their unjust actions.⁵

The story is similar to that of the poor widow's encounter with the prophet Elijah, who asks for her last bit of food (see 1 Kings 17:8-16).⁶ In that passage, however, the widow, her son, and the prophet are all provided with adequate nourishment during the famine. In this story in Mark, the widow receives no such promise from Jesus, who does not even speak to her in the passage. Her sacrifice is made without any reassurance that she will be rescued from the risks she has voluntarily taken through her gift to the temple treasury. In that light, it is an amazing act of trust. Her behavior is consistent with Jesus' call to his disciples to renounce everything, take up their cross, and follow him. It is the kind of extravagant generosity Jesus later demonstrates when he gives up his own life.

1. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 165.

2. PHEME PERKINS, "Reflections on the Gospel of Mark," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 682.

3. A. E. HARVEY, *The New English Bible Companion to the New Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 187.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Perkins, 682.

6. *Ibid.*, 683.

PASTORAL REFLECTION

BY REV. CATHY TAMSBERG

More than a dozen years ago, I participated in a Ministry of Money workshop where this statement was the mantra: "Money is at the root of our spiritual journey." As a legal aid lawyer who represented poor people every day, I did not have to be convinced. Regular exposure to people who were destitute by American standards had taught me that every decision pertaining to money and the things it can buy is a spiritual one. Where I live, what I drive, what I eat, where I shop, what I wear, how I entertain myself...they all go to the core of what is important to me. I can be like the self-important scribes in today's lectionary passage, who give the appearance of devotion to the faith while lining their pockets on the backs of the poor. Or I can be the widow, who humbly gives all that she has. Either way, the decisions I make reflect the heart of who I am. They telegraph my values to the world.

In his analysis of the weaknesses of both conservative and liberal theology today, Joerg Rieger shares the view of Jacques Lacan that we live in "the era of the ego."¹ Rieger and Lacan assert that we live in a period of history when the "self" has become the central focus of society, especially in the United States. Thus, whether we like it or not, we live in a narcissistic culture. For most Americans, if "me and my experience" is not the sole focus of life, it is in fact the starting point. In this environment, it becomes very difficult to see beyond the end of one's physical, emotional, and spiritual nose to witness the needs of the world around us. The cure, they suggest, is to construct a theology and a life that recognize our basic connectedness to the "other." Quoting Frederick Herzog, Rieger implores us to understand the commandment to "love one another" as an invitation to discover the other as co-constitutive—as an inseparable part—of one's self.²

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If I could get beyond myself, what values would I embody? I think the widow who offers her mite in the temple gives us a hint. In the first place, I would find my way to the temple as she did. Recognizing in the ego's era that there is Something, Someone greater than my "self," I would search diligently for that One.

(continued on next page)

Rather than going there to be seen, to share, or even to relate, I would go there in deep humility to offer all that I have to the Creator of the universe, the artist who paints the trees a thousand shades of green and heals human bodies through the activity of an incredibly complex immune system.

If the widow were the model for my values as I combat the American “legacy of individualism”³ that haunts my every move, I would not only give generously—I would live generously, even when ordering my life in that manner puts me at risk. Mark tells us that the widow gave all that she had to live on. Incredible. Many of us grew up singing the hymn I Surrender All, but as someone has quipped, most of us are hesitant to surrender some. And in the ego’s era, there is ample encouragement not to surrender anything at all.

If we lived generously, we would proclaim to the world through our actions that we trust God enough to share what God has given to us with others. We would not tolerate the kind of poverty that natural disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes force onto our television screens. We would not abide the sale of politicians and political decisions to the highest corporate bidder. We would refuse to participate in the pollution of the planet in all the ways possible. We would make peace—within our families, with our neighbors and co-workers, among races and classes and nations—our highest goal.

This kind of life is not without risk. The story of the scribes and the widow ends before we know what happens to them in the end. Mark doesn’t give us the rest of the story. In fact, the scribes probably went home to a sumptuous feast. The widow probably ate whatever scrap of food was left at home, or perhaps she subsisted through the kindness of neighbors. But I wonder if on that day in the temple, someone besides Jesus and the disciples saw her give her mite to the treasury. I like to think that some person looking beyond his or her own wants and needs caught a glimpse of her risky generosity. But it really doesn’t matter because Jesus saw it. He pointed it out to the disciples and we know about it two thousand years later. Through her gift we know that real moral values are not about appearance or power or ego. Rather, real moral values reflect a generous way of living that stretches beyond the ego to meet the needs of a suffering world.

1. Joerg Rieger, *Remember the Poor: The Challenge to Theology in the Twenty-first Century* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 22.

2. *Ibid*, 28.

3. Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Charyl H. Keen, James P. Keen, Sharon Daloz Parks, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 10.

WORSHIP AID – ‘ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON’

RESPONSIVE READING

O God, teach us to be generous:
to serve you as you deserve to be served;
to give without counting the cost;
to fight without fear of being wounded;
to work without seeking rest;
and to spend ourselves without expecting any reward, but the knowledge that we are doing your holy will.
Amen.

(adapted, Ignatius of Loyola)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Lord God,
We ask that by your holy light you illuminate the instances in our lives where we have not lived up to your name. We denounce “obvious” evils in our society such as murder, rape, domestic violence, thievery, and sexual exploitation. However, we often fail to remember that your gospel calls us to see the world as you see it – from the vantage point of the “least of these.” In looking around us in this manner, we see the daily evils that boldly counter your gospel. We see societal ills that habitually oppress the poor. We see societal ills that blatantly disobey your Word. We confess that we have not been extravagantly generous with our time, resources, or prayers.

Lord, forgive us. Forgive us for not speaking against an immoral budget that exploits our brothers and sisters. Forgive us for ignoring the plight of those unable to afford health care because of rising costs. Forgive us for denying the tremendous damage that racism does to our society. Forgive us for remaining silent over issues of immigration, the death penalty, and the need for a living wage. Convict us to act in the name of Jesus Christ for justice and mercy, just as you have shown toward all. Remind us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Forgive us, dear Lord, for our daily hypocrisy. Cleanse our souls and our bodies with your saving grace.

Amen.

(by Jason R. Jenkins)

SUGGESTED HYMNS

- ✓ Lord, Whose Love Through Humble Service PH 427/CH 461/MW 688/GA 681/TH 610/UMH 581
- ✓ You Are the Salt of the Earth, O People NCH 181
- ✓ We Cannot Own the Sunlit Sky GA 710/CH 684/NCH 564
- ✓ O Young and Fearless Prophet UMH 444/CH 669

w Hymnal Legend w
† UMH – United Methodist Hymnal
† PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
† TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
† MW – Moravian Book of Worship
† CH—Chalice Hymnal (Disciples of Christ)
† BH – Baptist Hymnal
† NCH—New Century Hymnal (UCC)
† GA—Gather Hymnal (Roman Catholic)

ADDITIONAL PRAYERS

Unlimited generosity

You asked for my hands that you might use them for your purposes.
I gave them for a moment then withdrew them for the work was hard.

You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice.
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.

You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty.
I closed them for I did not want to see.

You asked for my life that you might work through me.
I gave you a small part that I might not get "too involved".

Lord, forgive me for calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient for me to do so, and only in those places where it is safe to do so, and only with those who make it easy to do so.

Lord,
forgive me
renew me
send me out as a usable instrument,
that I may take seriously the meaning of your cross.

(edited, by Joe Seramane, South Africa; from the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, http://www.cafod.org.uk/resources/worship/prayers/prayers_about_poverty/unlimited_generosity)

A True Act of Faith

Loving God, we come to you in thanksgiving, knowing that all we are and all we have is a gift from you. In faith and love, help us to do your will. We are listening, Lord God. Speak your words into the depths of our souls, that we may hear you clearly. We offer to you this day all the facets of our lives, whether it be at home, at work, or at school – to be patient, to be merciful, to be generous, to be holy. Give us the wisdom and insight to understand your will for us and the fervor to carry out our good intentions. We offer our gifts of time, talent and possessions to you as a true act of faith, to reflect our love for you and our neighbor. Help us to reach out to others as you our God have reached out to us.

Amen.

(from "Reflections and Prayers," Generous Giving, www.generousgiving.org)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

• QUOTES •

Blessed are those who can give without remembering and take without forgetting.

Elizabeth Bibesco

We should give as we would receive, cheerfully, quickly, and without hesitation; for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers.

Seneca

Let us not be satisfied with just giving money. Money is not enough, money can be got, but they need your hearts to love them. So, spread your love everywhere you go.

Mother Teresa

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

John Wesley

• VIGNETTE •

Generosity can be practiced at many levels, not just by individuals like the widow in Jesus' story. Consider the following: Congregations and denominations can show generosity by paying lower-wage employees more than they must and by the amount of money and time given to help vulnerable people, either locally or beyond the local community.

Businesses, too, can show generosity by how they treat their lowest-level employees, by what priorities they have besides profit, and by how much they give away in their own communities or beyond.

Developed nations demonstrate generosity by how much they give to help people in developing countries. The United States currently ranks last among developed countries in the percentage of gross national product spent on development assistance (from Bread for the World, www.bread.org/learn/global-hunger-issues/millennium-challenge-account/questions-and-answers.html).

The following vignette describes a connection between national generosity and church generosity:

THE UNITED NATIONS' "MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS" & THE FINANCIAL COMMITMENT OF THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

from the UN website, www.un.org/millenniumgoals.com and the Episcopal Relief and Development website, www.e-rd.org/programs_63460_ENG_HTM.htm

In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit, world leaders agreed to a set of time-bound and measurable goals and targets for combating poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. Placed at the heart of the global agenda, they are now called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Summit's Millennium Declaration also outlined a wide range of commitments in human rights, good governance and democracy. At the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in early 2005 in Monterrey, Mexico, leaders from both developed and developing countries started to match these commitments with resources and action, signaling a global deal in which sustained political and economic reform by developing countries will be matched by direct support from the developed world in the form of aid, trade, debt relief and investment.

The MDGs provide a framework for the entire UN system to work coherently together towards a common end. The UN Development Group (UNDG) will help ensure that the MDGs remain at the centre of those efforts. On the ground in virtually every developing country, the UN is uniquely positioned to advocate for change, connect countries to knowledge and resources, and help coordinate broader efforts at the country level.

The world is making progress toward the MDGs—but it is uneven and too slow. A large majority of nations will reach the MDGs only if they get substantial support—advocacy, expertise and resources—from outside. The challenges for the global community, in both the developed and developing world, are to mobilize financial support and political will, re-engage governments, re-orient development priorities and policies, build capacity and reach out to partners in civil society and the private sector.

The Episcopal Church has adopted these Millennium Development Goals in most their most recent General Conventions. Resolution D006, passed at the 74th General Convention in 2003, stated:

“That the Convention, recognizing that funding for nutritional, education, health care, and development programs is essential to achieve not only the MDGs, but also for recognizing the dignity of all human beings, reaffirm the 73rd General Convention’s Resolutions A001 and D033 challenging all dioceses and congregations to contribute 0.7% of their annual budgets to fund international development programs; and be it further Resolved, That the appropriate offices and staff of the Episcopal Church Center, in cooperation with Episcopal Relief and Development, promote among dioceses and congregations education about and participation in the 0.7% contribution for international development.”

Episcopal Relief and Development, a compassionate response of the Episcopal Church to human suffering in the world, spearheads the implementation of the 0.7% contribution towards the Millennium Development Goals. The following explanation of the Goals and the actions necessary to achieve them is provided by Episcopal Relief and Development:

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS	WHAT WE NEED TO DO
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.	Cut in half the number of people who live on less than \$1 per day. Cut in half the number of hungry people.
2. Achieve universal primary education.	Ensure that boys and girls everywhere are able to complete a full course of primary school.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women.	Eliminate discrimination against women in education and wages.
4. Reduce child mortality.	Reduce by two-thirds the number of children who die before age five.
5. Improve maternal health.	Reduce by 75% the number of women who die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth.
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.	Stop the spread of these diseases and see a decline the death rates.
7. Ensure environmental stability	Cut in half the number of people without access to safe drinking water. Reverse the loss of natural resources by practicing sustainable development.
8. Develop a global partnership for development.	Improve levels of development assistance, provide access to markets, offer solutions for indebted countries.

• CONTACTS AND OTHER RESOURCES •

- W www.nccouncilofchurches.org/areasofwork/issues/economic_justice/economic_justice_issue.html—North Carolina Council of Churches' Economic Justice issue page.
- W www.generousgiving.org—Generous Giving, a privately funded ministry that seeks to encourage givers of all income levels - as well as pastors, church lay leaders and others - to experience the joy of giving and embrace a lifestyle of generosity, according to God's word and Christ's example. It was launched in 2000 by the Maclellan Foundation to stir a renewed, Spirit-led commitment to generosity among Christians.
- W www.simpleliving.net—The Simple Living Network. The idea for The Simple Living Network originally grew out of Founder Dave Wampler's work with The Institute for Earth Education. Dedicated to helping people find ways of living more lightly on the earth, Dave wanted to use his skills and knowledge to start a service network that would make information and resources available to those interested in changing their patterns of consumption. Today The Simple Living Network is charting new waters by serving as a model that upholds a strong commitment to community service and ecological commerce. The goal of The Simple Living Network is to fund operations without excessive support from government, industry or foundations so that we may remain a stable and independent voice, free from the bureaucratic constraints that often come with the fundraising/nonprofit structure.
- W www.bcm-net.org—Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries, founded in 1998 as an ecumenical experiment in discipleship and mutual aid. BCM offers: 1) a circle where persons called to "dis-established" gospel ministry can find support to discern leadings of the Spirit; 2) an organizational vehicle that promotes gospel practices of mutual aid, reconciliation, Sabbath economics, nonviolence and social justice; 3) an umbrella structure that facilitates capacity-building among people of faith committed to the work of peace and justice organizing, church renewal and holistic discipleship.
- W www.philanthropyjournal.org/page15212.cfm—Philanthropy Journal, North Carolina page. The vision of the Philanthropy Journal is to help people understand, support and work in the nonprofit and philanthropic world, and help them recognize and solve social problems. Through a daily web site and free, weekly email bulletin, the Philanthropy Journal delivers news, information and opinion about charitable giving, fundraising and management, focusing in particular on organizational effectiveness, donor engagement and collaboration.

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- q According to Charity Navigator, giving to charities in 2004 rose 2.3% from 2003 levels when adjusted for inflation.¹
- q Religious organizations in 2004 received the most financial support—\$88.3 billion. Much of these contributions can be attributed to people giving to their local place of worship. The next largest sector was education, receiving \$33.8 billion (see table on next page).
- q After two years of double-digit rates of growth, giving to international affairs and development declined by 1.8% (adjusted for inflation) in 2004. Organizations in the human services sector saw giving drop by 1.1%, which is the third year in a row for a decline in this sub-sector.²

1. Charity Navigator, www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm/bay/content.view/catid/3/cpid/42.htm. The following fact are from th is resource.
2. Giving USA (2005)..

2004 Charitable Contributions & Private Donations

Organization Type ⁴	Amount Contributed (in billions)	Percent
Total	\$248.52	100%
Religion	\$88.30	35.5%
Education	\$33.84	13.6%
Foundations	\$24.00	9.7%
Health	\$21.95	8.8%
Unallocated giving	\$21.36	8.6%
Human services	\$19.17	7.7%
Arts, culture	\$13.99	5.6%
Public-society benefit	\$12.96	5.2%
Environment/ animals	\$7.61	3.1%
International affairs	\$5.34	2.1%

Top Organizations Receiving Private Donations ⁵
1. Salvation Army
2. American Cancer Society
3. Gifts in Kind International
4. YMCA
5. Lutheran Services In America
6. AmeriCares Foundation
7. Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund
8. American National Red Cross
9. Feed the Children
10. Harvard University

- q Individual giving has yet to return to the heights of the late 1990's, when the hot stock market was fueling philanthropy. In 1999, charitable giving as a percent of personal income reached 2.2%.⁶
- q C. Ray Clements, chair of the American Association of Fundraising Counsel, reports that about 70% to 80% of Americans contribute annually to at least one charity. He states that "being a philanthropist does not merely mean making huge gifts; it means giving to any cause that you value."⁷

4. Infoplease, citing the AAFRC Trust for Philanthropy/Giving USA 2004.

5. Infoplease, citing The Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2004.

6. "Annual U.S. Donations to Nonprofits Climb 5%," by Jacqueline L. Salmon, The Washington Post, 13 June 2005.

7. Giving USA (2005).