
Where is Your Poverty?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Ash Wednesday – Year B

[We are treated] as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. 2 Corinthians 6:10

Last week, I spent some time on a retreat, in the desert. I did sleep comfortably in a hotel every night; but during each day, I traveled to a little Franciscan community, where I listened to one of the great spiritual teachers of our time.

I came away from my time with new learnings and teachings, for sure. But I also came away with renewed appreciation for the Order of the Franciscans; because the Franciscans, as most of you know, take a vow of poverty when they become a brother.

A vow of poverty. For most of us here in the United States, and maybe throughout the world, for those of us who participate deftly in the world of commerce, and of buying and selling, and trading, and acquiring and saving, and spending—for most of us, the vow of poverty is a murky and mysterious place, a region about which we have only strange images. Poverty scares many of us. Poverty is something we are taught to avoid. And an intentional vow of poverty is quite foreign to us, almost terrifying, because we simply cannot imagine not owning anything.

What would it mean not to own anything? Wow.

While most of us have spent so much of our lives trying to acquire things, my Franciscan brother has decided to own nothing. When I heard him reflect on that vow, last week, I realized, however, what a magnificent gift God has given him in that vow. He has been released. He doesn't have to enter the world of acquiring and losing.

Now, I realize he must have his problems, I am sure. Contrary to popular thought, monastics do not remain unscathed from the temptations of the world; but, at its best, his vow of poverty has released him from lots of other problems. With nothing to own, he doesn't have to worry about losing things either.

In George and Ira Gershwin's opera, Porgy sings about this way:

*"I've got plenty of nothing, and nothing's plenty for me.
...Folks with plenty of plenty, got to pray all the day
Seems with plenty you sure got to worry how to keep the devil away."*

The Christian Church, by long-standing custom, has urged her members to give up something during Lent. That might mean fasting; it might mean some other behavior of self-denial. But giving up something is not meant to harm us, or to teach us some hard lesson, or to punish us. Instead, like the Franciscans, the Church knows that when we genuinely give up something, we gain some freedom from it. Giving something up is meant to free us for something else.

Now, the city of Atlanta, and certainly the Buckhead area, are hard places to give up things. And, I admit that it is quite hard for us take a vow of poverty here.

But today, Ash Wednesday, might be a good day to search for the poverty that is already in our lives. Ash Wednesday, a day of self-examination, is a day to discover where we are poor. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Blessed are those who know their poverty.

Most of us, especially most of us gathered in this room this morning, have a hard time being poor. We are accustomed to giving out of our abundance, just like the people in Jesus' time. One day Jesus was at the temple watching what people gave to the treasury, making their offerings. He saw most people give out of their abundance, which means they gave out of plenty, out of their excess. Jesus saw a lot of people give to the Temple treasury out of what they had left over. Financial people define this "excess" giving as "discretionary income." It is what we have left over. Many people give to the church out of their discretionary income, what they have left over. We did it in Jesus' time, and we do it still today.

One day Jesus saw something else. He saw a poor widow come and put in two small, copper coins, the equivalent of one penny in today's currency: the widow's mite. He pointed that woman out and said, "She has put in more than everyone else." More than everyone else.

Why was it more? Because, Jesus said, everyone else gave of their abundance, out of their excess. The widow gave out of her poverty, and she gave everything she had. Jesus saw it.

Money can get us into trouble. But money can also free us. Money can deliver us, too, when we use it well, and when we learn to give it. Money can deliver us, when we learn to give it away. The more generous we are with our money, the freer we are from it. And the freer we are from it, the more we can use it properly and healthfully.

This is what Jesus saw in the widow who gave everything she had. Jesus saw an amazing freedom, a freedom that most of us may only approach.

God wants us to approach that freedom. God wants us to give from the very place where we think we have nothing. This is what Jesus means when he says, "This woman gave out of her poverty."

Poverty means, of course, being poor. It means lacking. All of us, from the richest to the poorest, are lacking in something. All of us are poor in something. And whatever we are poor in, is what we should be offering to God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

What are you poor in? Lent is the season to consider that question. Where are you poor? Where is your poverty?

Are you poor in money? Yes, money has a peculiar seduction to it. J. Paul Getty was at one time reputed to be the richest man in the world, and they asked him how much was enough. He replied, "Just a little bit more." That answer is probably true for all of us. No matter how much money we have, we say to ourselves, "You know, why don't I feel like I have enough? No matter how much we have, we sometimes feel poor in money. Are you poor in money? Give it away.

Are you poor in spirit? Do you feel depressed? Yes, that is the modern malaise, isn't it? Some of us may be clinically diagnosed as depressed, but many more of us worry about it now. Am I suffering from depression? Are you poor in spirit? Then give from that place.

Yes, even if you claim you are poor in spirit, try to give some spirit away. Go up to somebody and encourage them, instead of waiting for them to encourage you. Give somebody some spirit.

Are you poor in confidence? Give somebody else some confidence.

Are you poor in love? You don't think you have enough? Then give some love to someone else.

It's amazing what will happen. Jesus put it this way. The measure you give will be the measure you receive. He didn't mean it as a reward. It is a fact, a principle, a fact of life. "Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:37-38).

This is why the widow was blessed. Like a Franciscan, she was in touch with her poverty. When she gave out of her poverty, she was receiving everything. Like Paul, she had nothing, and possessed everything. This is why we receive ashes on our

foreheads this day. When we receive these marks of our humility, when we know our poverty, when we realize we have nothing, then we possess everything. When we acknowledge even our own death, then we also know eternal life.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*