
What Does It Mean to Give from Poverty?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 27 – Year B

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.”
Mark 12:41–44

The other day something happened at one of our neighboring churches. It was “Giving Sunday,” or “Pledge Sunday,” or “Stewardship Sunday,” or some similar day. It was a day when the church designated the Senior Minister to talk about how we need to give generously to our churches. You know what type of Sunday it was!

Anyway, a couple was leaving the church, and the man turned to the woman and said, “You know, I was glad to hear the minister say that he had no idea how the Church was going to get the money it needed. I was glad to hear him say he had no idea. Because, for a minute, I thought he was going to say that it had to come from us!”

Ha!

Where is the church going to get the money it needs?

Some of us depend upon the big donors. And, believe me, the church needs generous large donors. Many churches, and ours, too, appreciate those who give from their abundance. Jesus said elsewhere, “From those to whom much is given, much is required” (Luke 12:48). That is good. I enjoy people who give out of their abundance. The church needs people like that. We really do.

And so, when Jesus looked at the Temple treasury one day, he saw the marvelous new building projects, and the new classrooms, and he appreciated how they were named. There was Jeremiah Hall, given by the beautiful Jeremiah family. There was the exquisite Isaiah courtyard. And there was the lovely Leviticus Hall, given by the historic Levite family.

Those gifts are incredibly important! Thank you!

But Jesus also noticed something else that day. He certainly did not condemn the large givers. But what he remarked upon was the person who was giving out of her poverty.

He saw a poor widow, who had no family at all, much less a wealthy family; and she put in a few meager coins. He chose her to talk about, and to praise her, “*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.*”

What was it about her gift that Jesus applauded? What does it mean to give out of one’s poverty? Well, if poverty means

being poor in something, Jesus is saying “Blessed are the people who give out of the places where they are poor.”

People who give out of their poverty give from the places where they are weakest. Maybe they don't have much money; but they give it, and they give a lot of it, often more generously than the people who do have lots of money.

In my old years, I've known both the poor and the rich. I have been friends with both. I have served churches where the top givers were NOT at all the wealthiest people in the congregation. They simply tithed, they gave ten percent of their income, before taxes, to their local congregation, and they enjoyed doing so. They really got something wonderful out of it.

And, I've known wealthy people who give a lot. They, too, enjoy doing so. They get something wonderful out of it. And I have known both rich and poor, who do not give. The poor who do not give, I tend to understand and be sad for, and to care for. But the rich who do not give. I have known them, too, and they really do provoke sadness. Because, though they have money, they were some of the poorest people I have ever met. Poor in generosity, for sure—but also poor in relationships and poor in happiness, too.

You know, one of the most powerful offerings we ever take up, here at the Cathedral, is at the All Saints Homeless Requiem Eucharist, when we invite so many homeless people for dinner and for prayer. Many of you have been here for that holy day, over the years. And many of you have noted, that during the service, when our nave is full of homeless people, with almost nothing to their name, we actually take up an offering. We pass the plate.

One of the most amazing sounds this cathedral ever hears, every year, occurs during that offering of the All Saints Day Requiem Eucharist. It is the sound of coins, metal coins striking the metal offering plates. Poor people, who have hardly anything, give what they do have. They are poor, and yet they give. I don't do the math, but I imagine they give an incredible percentage of their annual income to God in the offering plate. They give an incredible percentage of their *assets*, their *entire wealth*, to God in the offering plate!

That offering is a special offering here. (By the way, the Cathedral does not put that offering into our own treasury. We immediately pass it on to one of the agencies here that night who are serving the poor.)

When we think of poverty, we probably think of someone being poor in financial wealth. And the word does mean that. But these words of Jesus also deliver an incredible spiritual principle that goes beyond money. It is about money, for sure. When we give from our poverty of money, God does bless us.

But poverty, like wealth, can be about things other than money. Many of us are poor in spirit, poor in relationships, poor in happiness, poor in courage, poor in wisdom; we even feel poor in love.

What does it mean to give out of our poverty when our poverty is about something other than money? Well, the principle is the same. I believe Jesus means to give from any place in our lives that feels weak, or thin, or poor. I believe Jesus means to give from the place we feel the weakest, from the place where we feel the poorest. That's what giving from our poverty means.

Are you poor in relationships? Then, give from there. Invite someone to sit with you at church, in the park, go for a walk with someone. Are you feeling poor in courage? Give even your most meager attempt at bravery! Many military veterans, here today on Veterans Day, know what that is like—to be brave when they were not feeling courageous at all. We salute them!

Are you feeling poor in love, as if no one loves you? Then, give from that place! Go give whatever small sliver of love you do have to someone else! It is amazing what happens when people who don't think they are loved go out and try loving someone.

Are you feeling unhappy about yourself? Are you poor in happiness? Well, giving from that place means going out and finding someone else for whom you can be happy. Yes, try being happy for someone else! The odds are you will feel happier about yourself as well.

Give from whatever place you feel the weakest. Sometimes that requires some self-examination. Where am I the weakest? Where am I the poorest? That is the place from which God invites me to give.

Most of you here at church each Sunday have heard what I say about the Sunday offertory plate and procession. But I say it again, especially on this day when so many of us will process with our pledge cards or our intention cards.

It is this: Everyone has something to give! It may not be money, or wine, or bread, or music. It may be joy and laughter, and it may be sorrow or pain. And it may not be much at all. But, whatever it is, the offertory procession is an opportunity to give it to God. Touch the plate with whatever weak gift you have and let God bless it.

Here at this church, we are in the business of miracles. The miracle is that the only things God has to work with are the gifts that start from us. They may be small, and they may be huge. But God changes all of them. The miracle is that God turns them from weakness to strength, over and over again.

The saints whom Jesus sees as the strong, the faithful, the blessed, are those who give from our poverty, from the places where we actually feel the weakest.

AMEN.

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