

Who Devoured the Widow's Mite?

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. Good to see you. Good to be with you. My name is Anthony Parrott, and I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the table. And we are on week two of talking about generosity and communal economics. We're talking about money. We're talking about giving. If that fills you with a little bit of anxiety, I'm right there with you. But last week, Pastor Tanetta and I, we kind of set the stage of what we want to do as we talk about this for the next few weeks. Yes, churches depend on donations. Yes, churches, you know, involve money. I'm going to talk about that.

But beyond that, we are all, you know, have a money story. We all have ways that we interact with our economics and the way that we interact with money or the lack thereof or debt or the lack thereof or inheritance or the lack thereof. And it's our conviction that if we don't talk about this, then somebody else will do it on our behalf. And quite frankly, I don't necessarily trust this economic system that we live in and the environment that we live in to do it well.

So we want to start a conversation here about that. There was a section of my sermon that I forgot to give last week, so you're going to get it now. And it's actually not about giving in generosity. So you can, you know, you can shrug your shoulders and relax for a little bit. A couple weeks ago, Pastor Tanetta, myself, and then our Director of Admin and Communication, Mish Van Essen, we went to Denver for a couple conferences to basically hang out with other pastors, ministry leaders, nonprofit leaders who are in one way or another attempting to do something similar to what the table is doing, trying to reimagine a church that doesn't just put like a banner that says all are welcome and stops there, but actually tries to live that out in some way. And it was a, I was just telling some of our tech team that like more than half of the reason we went to these conferences, at least for me, was just to hang out with Tanetta and Mish, just to enjoy each other's company and to hear each other's stories and to kind of, you know, the kind of thing that you do. We had like an Airbnb and so we got under each other's skin and we also got to like share what our hopes and dreams are for the church. But, you know, there was also the conferences themselves and there were two very different conferences. One was very much queer and black led. The other one was very much not.

Now, all trying to kind of get at the same thing of because we believe in Jesus, that should lead us to be welcoming and affirming and anti-racist, but kind of coming at it from two different approaches.

So I wrote down just a couple of things I took away from this. One, I am filled with so much hope for the church. There's a couple spaces I interact with online where it's people who are sort of remembering and hashing out and trying to figure out their church trauma. And being in those spaces is important to, for me to be continually kind of confronted with just like the ugliness that the church can cause and church leaders can cause in the lives of people who have been historically marginalized or pushed to the edges. But it also can be a place where like some cynicism and some nihilism can kind of sprout up within me. And so to be in some spaces where there was so much hope and so much possibility, just their raw for the taking was really, really joy inducing in me.

[3 : 51] Now, combined with that was the fact that there is still so much work left to do. We can't just take the BS of white American evangelicalism and push it through a new Play-Doh mold and think that we're going to get something other than BS. That means there's a lot of like dismantling we have to do and divesting ourselves of prior theologies and ways of practice. That's hard and it takes labor and time.

But it confirmed in me my desire to see a church that doesn't just like make room for LGBTQ people, but actually gives them the keys, rebuilds the room, gives them leadership. Not just led by black and indigenous and people of color, but actually says, no, you all have been practicing a faithful way of Jesus for generations and we people like me to just sit down under your leadership.

It confirmed in me a desire to see churches absolutely obsessed with the loving, non-violent, enemy-loving, self-sacrificial way of Jesus and therefore become more revolutionary and radical.

therefore turn over tables, oppose unjust systems, and put myself in harm's way for the sake of those that I love. And most of all, it filled me with just such deep affection for you all. I'm so grateful for this church, for Resurrection City, for the people I get to work with, for the myriad of volunteers, some of which you see on a Sunday, some of which you don't. And for all of you who faithfully show up online, in person, in community groups across the DMV and across the country, I am honored, I'm grateful, and just that word affection keeps coming up for me. I just like you all a lot.

So thank you for letting me be a part of all of this. Now, this all relates to kind of what we're getting into. I don't usually give my sermons titles, but I thought today I would. Today's sermon is called, Who Devoured the Widow's Might?

[6 : 19] Anybody who grew up in church, do you know the story of the widow's might? Yeah, okay, some hands are going up. Um, so we're going to talk about, you know, one of these famous Jesus stories around giving and money.

Now, before we do that, I have to admit, um, pastors, clergy members, professional Christians like me, uh, when you do a poll about who are some of the, uh, when you do a poll on who are some of the most untrustworthy people in the nation, people like me come right up. Clergy, some of the least trustworthy people right in the same region as, like, car salespeople. Sorry, any car salespeople watching? Um, my profession, those in my profession, we've done a really wonderful job of basically just doing awful things and doing it in the name of Jesus. And so people don't trust us often. Um, you could look at any number of churches, any number of denominations, and you will see a lengthy track record of ways that money has been mishandled. The, uh, Roman Catholic Church is worth billions and billions of dollars and has made much of that money in unscrupulous, dishonest ways. We could talk about tele-evangelists and private jets and boats, and we can talk about hush money to pay off, uh, people who have been assaulted victims and survivors. So I want to acknowledge all that to grossly misquote elf. I realize I sit on a pulpit of lies, but I also think that there is some work that I can do to maybe, uh, undo some of that harm. So if you have a Bible, I invite you to, uh, flip it open, turn it on. We're in the book, the gospel of Luke chapter 21. Luke chapter 21 verses 1 through 4. This is the story of the widow's mite, and I will give some context in a little bit. I just want kind of want to read this as it is, as it would be, and just like a basic scripture reading for the day. Luke chapter 21 verses 1 through 4.

Now, I'm reading from a slightly unusual translation, so if the words are a little bit different, forgive me. This is from the NET, uh, and it says this. It says, Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box. Jesus also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. Jesus said, I tell you the truth. This poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all offered their gifts out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had to live on.

So a couple notes, uh, two small copper coins. You may have a footnote in some of your Bibles to say something like two pennies. It's not quite accurate. Uh, the, these copper coins would be worth about five to six minutes of someone's labor, uh, for the day at about minimum wage. So we're talking about 70 cents. So, you know, not much better than two pennies. Um, and yes, they're in the kind of temple complex in Jerusalem. You had a variety of courts, the courts of Gentiles, the court of women, and then you got further and further into the complex where Jewish men could go to make their sacrifices. And in the temple of women, there are these offering boxes where you could deposit your coins, uh, in order to support the temple system, sacrifices and building and all of that sort of thing. So Jesus watches some people put in some riches and wealth, uh, and sees this widow who would be among some of the most pushed to the edge kind of person in society, put in her 70 cents worth of, of coinage. Jesus says out of her, her poverty, she put in everything she had to live on.

Every, just about every English translation I looked at, uh, kind of brushes over the fact that, uh, in the, in the Greek, the literal Greek, what it says is that she put in her very life.

[10 : 47] So some translations say like livelihood, things like that. But the implication honestly is because of what she put in her, her ability to live is now greatly, greatly diminished way down to zero.

There are some tourists waving hello. Um, okay. What have you heard about this story? So we're gonna do a little bit of, um, just kind of large group call and response. What are some things that you have heard about this story? If you grew up in the church, if you're heard of hearing this story, you say it out loud. I'll try to repeat it for the sake of those listening online.

The rich people in the story are selfish. Yes. That's right. So to repeat what Becky said, you give to God first, and then you need to trust God for your life, your welfare, for everything else. That's right. Anything else you've heard about this?

Yes. You should be giving to the point that it inconveniences you. Give until it hurts, some preacher might say. Yeah. Anything else?

Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's right. We need a new and bigger church building, so you should give sacrificially so that we can have that. And yes, that whole idea of sacrificial giving, giving until it hurts, uh, in order to, yeah, support the physical labor, usually buildings or stuff, uh, of the church. And you need to do like this widow did in order to do that. So, long story short, this widow is put out as a, as an example to follow. Jesus is praising her as an example that we need to follow. Uh, she gave sacrificially. She gave her very life, her livelihood.

[12 : 45] We should do the same. Now, let me give you a few reminders about how the Bible works. When the Bible was put together, uh, when the Gospels were put together, there were no chapter breaks, all right?

So, this wasn't like Herman Melville being like chapter 21, and then Jesus looked up. There were no verse numbers. Those were all added years and years and years after the fact as a nice, easy way to reference what we're talking about. Uh, the Gospels quite often were performed as a piece all at once.

They'd either be read by one person dramatically, or you would have like a series of readers or even actors sometimes kind of portraying in front of you what was happening in the story. And so, you would sit down and you would hear the Gospel of Luke, the Good News of Luke in, you know, a couple hours all at once. Um, so no chapter breaks, no verse breaks, all performed at once. And it crossed my mind, but we just don't have time to like actually get some volunteers and actually act out, act all this out. We're not doing that. This isn't like, you know, the Toy Story show at Disney World. You're okay.

Um, but I want you to imagine as with as best as you can, the scene being played out in front of you. So, we're going to back up a few verses through at the end of chapter 20, Luke chapter 20, verses 45 and 47.

And this is after a very long speech that Jesus is giving in Jerusalem in the last week of his life before the crucifixion. So, Jesus is giving these long talks, lectures, speaking about the Gospel, the Good News, and says this in chapter 20, verse 45, just a few verses before this widow giving her copper coins. As all the people were listening, Jesus said to his disciples, so this group of people gathered around him in this court, beware of the experts of the law. In other words, the religious professionals, they like walking around in long robes, and they love elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and the best seats in the synagogues, and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' property, and as a show, make long prayers, and they will receive a more severe punishment.

[15:10] Then keep reading, okay? And Jesus looked up from this teaching that he was just giving, and he saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box. And he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And Jesus said, I tell you the truth, this widow has put in more than all of them, for they offered their gifts out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything she had to live on. Now, putting those two teachings of Jesus together, now what do we notice? Number one, Jesus is not praising the widow. Jesus does not start a statement by saying, blessed is she.

Jesus does not, Jesus does not talk about how great or exemplary her behavior is. Jesus does name that her sacrifice was larger. It was sacrificial. It did hurt. It was the giving of her very life.

But Jesus doesn't say, now go and do likewise. You ought to behave in the same way. Rather, Jesus just got done condemning the system and the leaders of the system who would make her so destitute in the first place. Jesus says, beware of these religious professionals, the way they walk around, the way they put themselves up front, up first, the way they try to draw attention to themselves. They devour widows' property. To devour someone's property is a Greek euphemism that basically means, I'm going to business them out of business. I'm going to figure out the legal ways that I can get their land, get their house, and do it in such a way that's legal, but puts them in a bad state.

So beware of these religious professionals who enrich themselves by making others poor, who make a show of themselves. Jesus looks up and says, hey, it's happening right in front of your eyes right now.

And then, the very next verses, which we haven't read yet, there are these people walking around admirably, admiring the temple. So this temple complex, which is the seat of basically everything important in Jewish life. And this is what the money is going to fund. So Jesus condemns the religious leaders, says they devour widows' houses. He says, look up, it's happening right before you. Then somebody's like, but yeah, the temple's really pretty, right? And Jesus says this, as for these things that you're gazing at, the days will come when not one stone will be left on another, all will be torn down.

[18:07] It would be like someone standing at this imaginary place that's a White House slash Wall Street slash the National Cathedral Basilica, Willow Creek, and being like, and then being like, wow, isn't this wonderful? And Jesus saying, it's all gonna burn, baby. Aside, I have these moments in my preaching and ministry where people will say things, and I've brought this up here before, hey, you shouldn't be so extreme or stark in your statements. What if you push people away? I'm like, sorry, have you met Jesus?

Jesus. His words, all will be torn down. Religious systems, all will be torn down. Political systems, all will be torn down.

Economic systems, all will be torn down. All systems that oppress, all systems that police or jail or fine or exploit, any system that takes the land or the air or the water for granted, any system of prejudice or patriarchy or racism, any homophobic, transphobic, melanin phobic, feminine phobic power that's trying to make a buck off of your oppression, all will be torn down. I have not yet reached the heights of the revolution that Jesus is calling me and calling us to, but we're all gonna keep reaching. Can I have a hallelujah?

So order of events. Jesus shows up at the temple. This is Luke 19, a chapter before. Jesus shows up at the temple. He turns over the tables. He pushes the money changers out. He claims the space as his own, as if God has taken up residence in the house, and then Jesus starts preaching. Luke chapter 20, Jesus condemns the corrupt elite class of religious professionals who exploit the poor, exploit the marginalized, and make a show of themselves while doing it in the name of God.

And then Luke chapter 21, Jesus sees an example of this exploitation before their very eyes, points out the inequity of the situation, then makes explicit his own revolutionary qualities. It will all be torn down. And the takeaway is, hey, you should give to the church just like that poor widow.

[20 : 38] Are we even paying attention? In my research for this sermon and the series, I've been brushing up a lot on the sort of resources that are out there in church spaces around giving and personal finance and tithing. And do you know how many resources, how many resources, talk about personal responsibility, getting out of debt, financial literacy, like all of them? Yes, exactly. Thank you. All of them. I mean, this just happened. We were in this theoretically like very progressive liberal space of like church planters and church leaders, and it was about church fundraising. And the main takeaway of the session was like, well, you should teach on financial literacy. Like, oh my gosh. Do you know how many of those resources, curriculums, how many of them talk about vicious systems that put people into debt, the ways that our legal system punishes you to dare to be poor? Do you know how many of those resources bother to critique an economic system that forces people into exhaustion and zero rest?

How many of those resources default towards the exploitation of all? Or did I condemn those? Those, you guessed it, about zero. Christian preaching often lifts up this widow as an exemplar to be imitated. But no, us preachers like me have not been listening or paying attention to the words of Jesus. Jesus' first sermon. First sermon in the Gospel of Luke, this very same Gospel of Luke.

Jesus preaches, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. So yeah, saying that the poor need to give all that they have to a religious system that's exploiting them would not be good news to the poor. Now, the implication of all this is not hoard all your money and keep it to yourself. Okay? Again, that also has nothing to do with the way and the teaching of Jesus, nor is it good news to the poor. Jesus, and honestly all of Scripture, gives really harsh words towards the rich, towards the hoarding of money and resources.

Scripture calls it evil, the source of all evil. Money has this corrosive power that makes it difficult to even see where God is doing God's work, much less see that work is good. There's a writer out there who I enjoy, but their work is pretty out there, at least on economics. If people knew that I read this guy regularly, I'd probably get canceled in certain spaces. But he has this amazing piece on what the church should do with money, and he writes this. He says, In the church, money needs to be collected from all the wealthy and distributed to the poor with the goal of financial equality for all. If someone has plenty of money, their extra needs to be given to those in need, vice-inverse, vice-versa. That way, everyone's level of wealth will be equal.

Now, the writer is the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 8. There's this other radical writer from a while ago. The jig is up.

[24 : 12] Again, it might get me canceled in certain spaces. This is what he says about private property. Private property is the fruit of iniquity. I know that God has given us the use of goods, but only as far as is necessary. He has determined that the use shall be common, the use of all things that are found in this world, are to be common to all people.

And only the most manifest iniquity makes one say to another, this belongs to me and that to you. And this is the origin of contention among people.

Is that Marx? Nope. It's the theologian Clement of Alexandria, 2nd century. One more, just for fun. Now, the rich are in possession of the poor's stuff. Even if they've acquired them honestly or inherited them legally, not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs. That's Basil the Great, another 4th century Christian theologian. So the implications of the widow giving away her 70 cents is not she is an example to follow. Rather, it's damn every last one of the systems that would put her in that situation, take her last bit of money, and then dare to call it sacred.

A couple more practical implications. Jesus's opening remarks about all of this begin about sort of ostentatiousness, about being showy with wealth, showy with our positions of honor or power or authority, walking around in fancy clothes, getting the best seat and receiving honor at meals.

And listen, y'all, we live in a place known for its power, where we either have the opportunity or want the opportunity to do every last one of those things. Where's my invite to that place, to that thing? What piece of clothing do I need to put on to make sure I'm putting forward my best face, my best foot? I think we are going to need a set of practices to release us from the grip of that sort of thinking. Learning to say no to being noticed, to say no to getting that seat of honor.

[26 : 50] And I think this has different implications depending on where you are or where you historically have been in terms of what opportunities have been granted to who. But I think that there's a set of practices that every single one of us need to be conscious of, of how do I make sure that that love of money, that love of opportunity, that love of honor doesn't reach its grip into my heart and take hold.

I think another practical implication is being, be aware of the experts in the law, of the religious professionals. And listen, I'm one of them. They like walking around in long robes.

They love elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, in the best seats in the synagogues, in the places of honor, at banquets. The church system today is still set up like this, where there's one dude with a microphone and a platform telling you how to read the Bible.

I've got issues with it, and I'm doing it. And I'm still trying to figure out, how do I, how do I divest myself of this system? But I think a big part of the problem of that system is that we granted people like me, others, permission to do so. They, and gave them the, we got this idea that only one person was the professional allowed to read the Bible in a certain way. And if we didn't read in that certain way, we would fall under God's, God's oppression and condemnation. And so all of this, I say with a caveat of like, don't, I don't know, don't take my word for it. Like maybe you do need to go oppress widows. I don't think that's the point.

But I think like, it shouldn't take one person on a platform telling you, hey, maybe don't rob people. And the fact that we've spent decades and centuries and millennia in a religious environment as a culture that said, yeah, but if it's for God, it's okay.

[28 : 52] I think we've, I think we've got to start saying no to that a lot more often. This is the middle of a conversation. We're not done. One of the kind of community practices, I feel like we need to, we're continually putting forward as a community is like, we're not going to walk out, walk out of here resolved, all tied up in a bow. But I think we at least start getting in a trajectory in a direction that says, if I hear a teaching about money that somehow enriches me and harms others, it somehow says that if it's for God, it's okay, that we need to walk away and set that down.