

Our Money Story: Reimagine

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Texts: Mark 12: 38-44 and Leviticus 19: 9-10; 25: 8-12

Maybe you remember the old hymn, *Take My Life and Let it Be:*

Take my life and let it be, Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;

Take my hands and let them move, At the impulse of Thy love,

At the impulse of Thy love.

And the third verse:

Take my lips and let them be, filled with messages for Thee;

Take my silver and my gold,

Not a mite would I withhold,

Not a mite would I withhold.

Say what? Does that mean every cent I have I would give to God? Sounds like the right thing to do. I mean everything we have and all that we are comes to us from God, so to dedicate it to the service of God is a good thing. The church, however, has used this song, and the verse that inspired it, to celebrate the gift of the widow's mite we read about in Mark's Gospel today and encourage church folk to give more. The church, historically, has

encouraged you to "give until it hurts" -- without actually saying that. I don't believe that is what Jesus was saying in this well-known scripture.

It's not normal during Stewardship season -- you know, giving season -- to do anything other than encourage people to give. Of course I want you to give to the church. This church and our wider church do many good things in this world. And, I'm afraid, we have a lot more work to do in the coming years. We're going to need every resource we have to help people become the best versions of themselves possible, and to advocate for those who are and will be left out, left behind, ostracized, ridiculed, hurt and humiliated. We are going to need every ounce of love we have at our disposal, and yes, every dime. But that doesn't change the fact that this story from Mark's Gospel has been misinterpreted and misapplied. Our theme this morning is "reimagine". Not only do we need to reimagine this story, but we need to reimagine our whole economic system if we want it to be more biblical.

In our preparation materials for this week (and the journal) from Sanctified Arts, the authors remind us that, "Scripture calls us to reimagine

a world where our social and economic systems are not built to disparage or impoverish, but instead to provide for and benefit all. This week we revisit the story of the widow's mite, a scripture that begs for reimagination and reinterpretation from the harmful ways it has been used. Instead of commending the widow's giving practices, perhaps Jesus is condemning the economic system that created her poverty. [Meanwhile, in our other scripture for today], the Jewish practice of the Jubilee year invites^{us} to imagine leaving the edge of harvest for the poor and immigrant to reap; in the fiftieth year, the harvest is shared and disparities are rebalanced. In light of these stories in scripture, we are called to reimagine our own money stories."

We won't spend as much time on the Leviticus passages, but suffice it to say that there is more to Leviticus than most Christians can imagine. There are some prescriptions in there that are disconcerting -- to say the least -- but it's interesting what scriptures we pull out of Leviticus to serve our own needs and which ones we ignore that threaten them. We're especially good at this when it comes to economics. We carry this ability to ignore biblical messages about money into the New Testament as well. So,

let's amend that practice and take a look again at the story of the widow's mite from Mark's Gospel.

In sermon after sermon, pastors have lifted up what seems to be Jesus' commending the widow for putting in her last dimes to the temple (a.k.a. church) treasury. Listen again... (Mark 12: 41-44)

Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

Did you notice what was left out? Jesus only mentions that the rich were giving out of their spare change. Jesus then focuses on the widow. She threw in two small copper coins worth a penny. I think you'll all agree it wasn't much money at all. The church has used that to say that even the smallest gift is welcome. That's true, but it neglects the rest of what Jesus says. "She, from her hopeless poverty, has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

Do we really believe that Jesus was directing us to give up what we

need to live on to support the church? Ponder that for a moment.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a noted New Testament scholar writes, "Before the destruction of the temple, [the treasury] was teh method used to fulfill the demand of teh Torah for the collection of alms for those perenially dispossessed...namely widows." You see, giving to the treasury "the rich were fulfilling their responsibilities...so that the widow would not have to. In fact, widows were not required to give to the temple." This isn't about marital status, but about means to give, and the purposes for giving. I'm sure that the temple treasury was used to maintain the temple and maybe to pay it's staff. Those aren't bad things in and of themselves. But I think it's likely that Jesus' message here is one of saracasm. Look at the widow over there...she's given all she has to live on! Those in his context had to have known that was judgment on the system for aiding in impoverishing the impoverished, rather than highlighting sacrificial giving. In the words of Lydia Hernandez-Marcial, "Praising the woman's act of devotion without denouncing the aforementioned ills is a way of being complicit in these abuses."

What Jesus is calling for is a radical reimagination of our money systems -- even in religion. This story, in the words of Hernandez-Marcial, invites us to "denounce leaders who demand high sums of money from their parishioners as offerings and mock -- openly or privately -- the humble offerings of those who have the least. At the same time, we can denounce the religious structures that welcome the most impoverished congregations' two coins -- mostly made up of minorities -- but do not see or pretend not to see their need."

What does this all mean for us? I don't want to be too prescriptive, but I do want to think about how we each give, and how we judge the gifts of others. And I don't mean just about money. We have a lot of judgment stories in our own money stories. We have judged others for food they have brought (or not bringing any), for giving little (as if we know how much they give), and for their lack of participation (as if we know their life issues). Jesus reminds us that it is from those who have the most that the most is expected. He also reminds us that it is our job as people of faith to care for those who have little or nothing. It is never our job to stand in judgment of what another does. Instead, we're asked, "what can we do?"

Are we able to share in the church and in the community with those who have the least?

One thing that impresses me about this congregation is that we have not built a huge building that requires much upkeep and care. Instead, we have put our money in people -- to a large degree -- and have continued to find new ways to share with others. We host the community meal virtually every week, even though it's not a ministry of the church alone, we share our resources so others might have something to eat. We share our building and our time and yes our money for programs like this.

We do participate in all five special offerings of the United Church of Christ, sending dollars to people throughout the nation and the world in the form of programs that restore broken lives, give hope to the hopeless, and promise a future to those who live amid the destruction of war and natural disaster. I do want to challenge us to give more to basic support of our wider church through OCWM, for often we don't realize the benefit to us from having brothers and sisters covenant with us in our faith journey.

In the end, there is always need for more. More money, more time,

more sharing of talent -- you name it. At the same time, the church and it's mission should be life-giving, not life-draining. All of us are asked to give from our strength, no matter how much or in what way we give. In our stewardship letter, I mentioned to you that we need about two percent more than last year. Pretty good management of money, given the inflation we've encountered this year. I also mentioned that some will give more and some will give less. This isn't a guilt trip, and it isn't about celebrating someone giving up their last dime. It is an opportunity to continue to experience our own money story and ask ourselves if we have enough to share. Also it is about where will we share.

I could end there, but just one more point about the story of the widow's mite that leads me to believe the interpretation was greatly in need of reimagination. The context. Here's what Jesus says just before the story of the widow's mite:

As he was teaching, he said, "Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly."

I'm not sure I need to explain this paragraph. But the real problem is those

who would cheat the widows out of their homes. Isn't it interesting that humans often look at something else to distract from what is really going on? That's clearly what has happened in this story.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

