

CONTRIBUTING FROM POVERTY

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
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I was mesmerized by this story of the poor widowⁱ when I heard it as a child in church and Sunday school. Some of you may have been too. Jesus watches many rich people contribute large sums as free will offerings to the Temple,ⁱⁱ but it's a poor widow giving a penny's worth who he says contributes the most. Jesus seems not to be as concerned about enough money being collected for Temple operations, as he is about the personal commitment of one person who can give very little. Unusual priorities! I was also impressed by the radical equalizing point of the story: A poor widow is worth as much as a human being as rich scribes sauntering about in long robes with lots of money to contribute to important causes. In fact, she seems much more to be honored.

Today I'd like to suggest that there's another dimension to this story. Jesus seems to be saying that contributing from abundance is a problem, to the extent that abundance remains as a basis for security, while contributing from poverty means we must find security in our love of God and our love of neighbor.ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Anderson, a Lutheran minister from South Carolina, writes in the most recent issue of the journal Christian Century that "The widow wasn't dependent on her money or her status in life; she had none of these. She was dependent on God and her neighbor for everything. She didn't have two feet to stand on, she didn't have bootstraps

to pull up. She was totally dependent -- and that's what Jesus pulls out of her story like a pearl of great price. This is what we are to be like before God -- dependent on nothing but the grace of God. We are to be people without any resources except the riches of God's mercy."^{iv}

It may help to look at the sociological and economic realities behind this gospel story. It isn't about a widow who happens to be poor. She's poor precisely because she's a widow. In the patriarchal culture of ancient Israel there wasn't any such thing as a rich widow. Women were entirely dependent upon men for their livelihood and sustenance. When a woman's husband died, there were no jobs available for women in the larger economy. There was no possibility of an inheritance. Women could not own property. There were no welfare checks or social security payments either. To be widowed meant that you were entirely dependent on other male relatives and on neighbors who might help you out with food, shelter, and clothing.^v

The truth probably is that these two small coins the widow contributed to the Temple weren't going to get her very far in any case. They weren't going to buy her independence. She was still going to have to rely on family and friends. Ultimately, she was going to have to rely on God, just like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air do.^{vi} She was going to have to rely on love, as manifested by family and friends and by the all-embracing arms of the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. So her contributing all she had from her poverty was really a sign of her appreciation for the love she was receiving. It was a way for her to express her own love for God and for the community around the Temple that was supporting her.^{vii}

I'll never forget the joy of poor Guatemalans whom I met some years ago when I spent a couple of months in Central America. After back-breaking work in the fields for negligible wages,

campesinos in comunidades de base, or base Christian communities, would get together around a few instruments and sing hymns together with enormous spirit and thanksgiving.^{viii} They showed and shared their love for God, and for each other, by these musical contributions from their poverty.

Here's something that's really baffled me. Why is it that the richest denomination in this country, per capita, the last time I looked -- my own Unitarian Universalism -- has the lowest rate of financial contribution by parishioners to the church? Why is it that the poorest denomination per capita, the Baptists, has the highest individual contribution level to their church in absolute dollars?^{ix} Note that this isn't just a difference in percentage of income contributed. This is a matter of which denomination raises more actual dollars per person from its congregants. I know there's an historical difference in whether or not the concept of tithing applies, but it's still a striking, if not appalling, difference.

Perhaps there's a link to a cover story in the most recent issue of the magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It's entitled "Squeezed for Time" It may also be relevant as Stanford students think back over their childhood and about heading home for Thanksgiving some two weeks from now. The author of the article describes a "sense of disquiet that the traditional components of family life -- [like] shared meals, unstructured activities, intergenerational gatherings, just hanging out -- are, among today's middle class families, giving way (or gave way long ago) to music lessons, dance classes, and football practices, with consequences we can only guess at."^x

The director of the marriage and family therapy program at the University of Minnesota, a

Unitarian Universalist and author of several books like Putting Family First, writes of "the colonization of family life by the forces of competitive capitalism" which leads to parenting as "a form of product development in which we look to maximize our child's opportunities in every way possible."^{xi} As an antidote, he prescribes things like family meals, eliminating television as a so-called family activity, and reduction of family members' manic outside activity levels.^{xii}

But it's worth noting what's already happened in the mindset of the next generation, if we agree that the daughter of the author of the Unitarian Universalist article. As a thirteen year old she writes a "Counterpoint" next to her father's piece in which she "completely disagree[s] with Putting Family First." As she explains: "Viola and homework take up far more time in my week than soccer. This is why I consider my weekly soccer practices a kind of outlet for my energy... If soccer practices were shorter, kids would just have more time to spend watching TV and playing on the computer. I also know for a fact that many...school-age kids like to avoid 'family time' at all costs... Too much family time can lead to serious problems."^{xiii}

This doesn't sound like the Guatemalan families I knew or the campesinos singing hymns together after work. It doesn't sound like the dependence on, and appreciation of, extended family that was central to the biblical widow's life. I certainly don't want to sound as if I'm romanticizing poverty here or wishing it on anyone. As Rev. Mary Anderson puts it: "No one dreams of growing up poor, of living from government check to government check, of digging through garbage cans, or living in run-down apartments with no heat."^{xiv} Yet, there's a reason that Jesus teaches in the temple: "Beware of the [rich] scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the

synagogues and places of honor at banquets."^{xv} First of all, they have the insensitivity to "devour widow's houses,"^{xvi} and second, they have the myopia to think that they can make it on their own in life, relying on their material possessions, their privilege and their self-importance. A Unitarian Universalist religious education director quoted in the magazine article reminds members of my denomination that "It will only be for so long in your life that your personal success in achieving a goal can be what you rely on for meaning." (Take note Stanford students!) "Sooner or later will come a time when you may not be able to achieve any goals beyond survival."^{xvii}

From my experience, I'd say that time can come when faced with a serious illness, when laid off from a job, or when left by a partner, among other things. One can try to pull oneself up by one's own bootstraps -- one can try to stand back up on one's own two feet -- but usually one needs to be embraced, loved, and buoyed back up by friends and family. Even more, one needs to sense that the ultimate law of the universe is love, that wholeness is connected to holiness, that life makes sense rather than being meaningless and absurd. In the words of this morning's psalm,^{xviii} "Happy are those whose help...is in the Lord their God...who keeps faith forever...who gives food to the hungry...[who] lifts up those who are bowed down...[who] watches over the strangers...[and] upholds the orphan and the widow... Praise the Lord!"

Let me tell you a story about warm beer. The connection to what I've been saying will become clear eventually, I hope. When I was 16 years old I went on an exchange program to the Netherlands. I lived with a Dutch counterpart who was 15 years old and an extended family of father, mother, and mother's retarded sister. It was a poor farming community, and I spent a fair

amount of time in the fields digging potatoes alongside my Dutch brother, as I called him. In the evenings we would all reunite for a wonderful family dinner. Then my Dutch brother would have a bunch of his neighborhood friends come by, or perhaps we'd go to one of their houses, and we'd drink bottle after bottle of Heineken beer. Yet the parents and other extended family members would always sit with us, supplying the beer in a country without a drinking age where Heineken flowed as freely after dinner as tea at other meals. We had wonderful cross-generational discussions -- about politics and religion (two of my favorite subjects) but also history, local culture, neighborhood gossip, and lots more. People depended on each other in the local community. They were always doing things for each other and looking out for each other.

One thing that bothered me, though: The beer was always warm. There was a refrigerator in the kitchen -- and in all the kitchens of the friends we visited, and I didn't understand why they didn't keep the beer on ice. One day I finally asked, and I got such an earful that I never asked again: "Oh, you Americans! You have no idea how to drink beer. You ruin your beer by freezing all the flavor out of it. Don't you know, especially by having tasted it here, that beer is best at room temperature, where you can savor all its richness and all its flavors? It's the only way to drink it."

That was in 1965. Then I returned for the first time to visit my Dutch brother and his family again during the 1980's. The first thing I noticed was that my Heineken was served ice cold. "What's going on here?" I complained. "You told me the only way to drink beer was at room temperature." "Oh," explained my Dutch brother. "This was a poor farming community when you came here. Now we're a bedroom community for Amsterdam with lots of professionals and

executives." (My Dutch brother by that time was an electrical engineer working for IBM).

"When you came here a generation ago, refrigerators were new and small and expensive to run. We'd only use them for food that had to be kept cold or frozen. Now we can all afford big refrigerators -- and multiple refrigerators at that. So there's plenty of room for the beer. Back then we certainly didn't want you as an American telling us how to drink our Heineken. But do you think we're crazy? Do you think we'd drink our beer warm if we could have it cold?"

But a lot more had changed by the 1980's than the temperature of the beer. Family dinners were few and far between with everyone so busy and children over-programmed. There were virtually no intergenerational gatherings after dinner. When there were, it was a matter of everyone staring silently at the TV that now dominated the living room. Life was speeded up, and ships passed in the night, in a world where affluence was assumed. Individualism and individual development now ruled.

So warm beer had meant community. Cold beer now meant personal enjoyment. Warm beer had meant warmth and caring and concern. Cold beer was ... cold. Today's gospel lesson reminds us of how much can be contributed out of poverty, or rather it reminds us of what dangers lie hidden in affluence, if we're not careful. I'm not suggesting for a moment that we idealize poverty, but instead that we never get attached to the trappings of wealth -- to the length of our robes, to who greets us with respect, to what places of honor we can occupy. I suggest that we seek our security not in abundance but in mutual love for our family and friends, and in love for the God who created and sustains all that is. May we be re clothed in our rightful mind, may we find a way to service through purer lives, and may we praise God in deeper reverence, always.

Amen.

NOTES

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- i. Mark 12: 38-44.
 - ii. For this interpretation of Mark 12:41-42, see The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 682.
 - iii. See Mary W. Anderson, "Living by the Word," The Christian Century (November 1, 2003), p. 18.
 - iv. Ibid.
 - v. Ibid.
 - vi. Matthew 6: 26,28.
 - vii. Anderson, "Living by the Word," p. 18.
 - viii. Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 186-187.
 - ix. See articles in Philanthropy magazine, citing Lilly Endowment and Gallup Poll studies; for example, Gregory Gannon, "Stepping Up to the Collection Plate: Why Catholics Don't Give on Sunday," Philanthropy (March/April, 2002), <http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/magazines/2000-05/gannon.html>
 - x. David Whitford, "What Family Time? Putting Family First in an Era of Super-scheduled Kids," UU World, Vol. XVII, No. 6 (November/December 2003), p. 31.
 - xi. Bill Doherty as quoted in Whitford, "What Family Time?" p. 31.
 - xii. See William J. Doherty and Barbara Carlson, Putting Families First: Successful Strategies for Reclaiming Family Life in a Hurry-up World (Owl Books, 2002).
 - xiii. Emma Whitford, "Soccer Brings Families Together," UU World, Vol. XVII, No. 6 (November/December 2003), pp. 34-35.
 - xiv. Anderson, "Living by the Word," p. 18.
 - xv. Mark 12: 38-39.

xvi. Mark 12:40.

xvii. Andrea Heier as quoted in Whitford, "What Family Time?" p. 33.

xviii. Psalm 146.