

In this age of constantly expanding and new technologies, there is absolutely no practical need for it. It could much more simply and sensibly be accomplished by dispensing a receipt upon completion of your transaction or electronically transferring funds to your account. But many years ago, the marketing gurus in Las Vegas, some of whom I still count today as friends, realized that people respond viscerally to tactile sensations. They figured out that people want to, and often need to hear it. No one wants a lousy piece of paper that says to go to the counter and collect your money. They want to listen to their winnings, to hear that lovely sound of metal coins clinking against metal containers. Yes, it is the sound of money and it is an intoxicating cacophony, an addictive noise for many. It is that sound that convinces people to drop another coin in the slot, another coin, and then another, in hopes of hearing it one more time.

My friends in the gaming industry, (as they prefer to refer to their industry because it sounds so much better than gambling) may think that this was an original innovation on their part. But the truth is, it was actually discovered a few years earlier than the advent of casinos. This morning, as you are imagining the scene in the temple with Jesus watching people dropping coins in an offering, don't picture our soft woven baskets. Think Mandalay Bay.

First century temples were lined with offering receptacles. They were made from metal and shaped like trumpets to create the greatest amount of clamor possible when

they were touched by metal coins. The idea in the first century temple was the same idea used in today's casino industry, only backwards. Slot machines make noise to create a Pavlovian feeling of euphoria for the player when they hear the sound. It also suggests to non-players that if they were to play, they might win also. Offering containers in the temple made noise to create a sense of satisfaction for the greatest givers and to create a feeling of guilt in those who could not generate as loud a sound. The idea was to shame you into digging deeper and giving the most possible, because everyone was listening and everyone would know what a cheapskate you were if you did not pay at least your tithe.

Casinos have an excuse. No one enters them without knowing that the place exists to make money. But you might hope for a little more from a religious institution. At least Jesus expects a little more, and hence his outrage today at the system the scribes have created. To begin with, no one should have the opportunity to judge another's giving habits. But even beyond that, Jesus says, this judging system is backwards. It rewards people not based on the percentage of the income they give, but rather on the total amount. It once again does what Jesus has been fighting against his entire ministry. It elevates the wealthy and the powerful, while making the poor and the oppressed even more invisible, with their stupid little coins that make such a disgustingly tinny sound.

But that is just the beginning of Jesus's rage against the machine this morning. On top of creating this shame based system of donation in the temple, it is the temple aristocracy, including the scribes, that created the widow's plight in the first place. You

see, by Hebrew law, widows were purposely left out of the financial loop. They were not allowed to receive an inheritance. Only men could do that, of course. Not only did the patriarchal society take away what was normally a widow's only potential source of income, but widows were not even allowed to defend themselves. In fact, the word widow in Hebrew means one who is silent, one who is unable to speak. A widow was therefore THE most vulnerable person in that society. We see the results of that not only with the widow in today's Gospel, but with all of the women in today's first reading from Ruth. Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi, as well as Ruth herself and her sister Orpah are all widows. So what do they have to do to feed themselves? They get to glean the fields, meaning they get to pick up the left over crop after it had been harvested. Naomi's plan to get Ruth married off to a rich guy named Boaz may seem unseemly to us, but it is, in fact, one of the only ways a widow could survive in that culture. The only other option for someone like Ruth was to turn to prostitution. This is another case of societal and religious laws creating poverty for an entire segment of the population. And that is what really gets Jesus steamed today.

That however, is not what I'm supposed to talk about today. These particular readings have been chosen very carefully in the Revised Common Lectionary to give me a chance to shake you down this morning. This is the time of year when churches historically do their fund drives and it is no accident that these stories happen to come up in the lectionary now. What I am supposed to tell you is that you are to follow the example of the poor widow, who gave everything she had. What you should not do, I am supposed to say, is just give out of your means, like the fancy dressed men in the

temple that Jesus observes today. If it doesn't hurt you, than you are not giving enough.

The only problem is that this is not really the point. Of course the widow must be admired for her selfless action. But what frosts Jesus this morning is the fact that this widow was placed in this position of poverty in the first place. What he is preaching about is not the widow, but the temple leaders who created the system that made her so poor. If we are going to hear Jesus today, we need to stop concentrating on the widow's donation, and start focusing on why Jesus is so upset.

Now some might suggest, in fact some have suggested, that what perturbs Jesus today does not apply to us anymore. After all, we don't have casino sounds in church when you make a donation anymore and we don't take away widow's inheritances and tell them to sit down and shut up. Therefore, we can just talk about how awful those scribes were and thank God that today's Gospel is not speaking directly to us...right? Yeah, sure.

Have any of you ever been shamed by a church into giving? Have any of you ever left a church because all they ever talked about was you giving money? How many news stories do we have to see of evangelists scamming widows out of their inheritances while they fly around the world in their leer jets before we begin to believe that maybe Jesus's ire today does apply to us?

I'm not just talking about "those other churches" either. Some of you have heard me state before that the only Protestant church in America that did not split in half during the Civil War was the Episcopal Church. I am not so sure however, that this is

something of which we should be proud. How did we manage to stay together? By not speaking out about the evils of slavery so that we would not lose the membership and donations of fat cat plantation owners in the south. The Episcopal Church of the 1940's through the early 1960's was the predominant denomination in America. But how did we become that church? By becoming the church of the elite, the church of the largest moneymakers in America and the church that never rocked the social justice boat once.

When our church did take a major stand during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and stood in solidarity with blacks across the south, not only were some of our members killed for their actions, but white people in the south left the Episcopal church in droves. And of course in recent years, as we have stood with our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, we have lost another chunk of members and another huge chunk of money. But by doing so, we have finally heard today's Gospel, we have heard Jesus's cry for the widow and we have responded.

Does that mean that we can skip today's Gospel? Hardly. We are still in love with the \$ 5,000,000 endowment. We still treat people differently who have given huge sums of money to the church. We still gear our message to the professional and still seem more concerned about attracting lawyers to our church than dishwashers. I was reminded of this just a few weeks ago again when a clergy person in our church condescendingly said this to me in one of our meetings; "Well, you are bringing new people into the church. But am I wrong in wanting to build this church so that it can support itself?" What he was suggesting of course, is that St. David's is made up of a bunch of losers with no money, while he was building a church of professionals. That,

beloved, is exactly what Jesus is preaching against today, and what that statement did was help me to realize why I love St. David's so much.

No one is arguing that without money we cannot run the wonderful ministries that we do, or even keep our doors open. But when we reach out first to the person with more discretionary income, we have completely lost the Gospel. We do our utmost to avoid that temptation at St. David's. One of the ways I do so is by not being aware of how much any of you give to this church. I want to avoid the trap that money creates, the trap that the scribes fell into that Jesus admonishes today. Whether we accept it or not, money clouds all of our viewpoints. I saw this dramatically portrayed again this past Thursday, on of all things, a tv show, Grey's Anatomy. Responding to a couple's suggestion that they might donate \$25,000,000 to the hospital, the administrative staff mandates that a surgeon do an operation that she knows is not the correct medical approach. As a result, a seven year old child dies.

Money is a necessity to accomplish all we do. But when we let it trump the Gospel, when we let it cloud our vision, we cannot care for the widow. We cannot be the church of and for everyone.

Finally, we must ask ourselves an even more difficult question. Who are our widows? Who is it that we as the church today have abandoned like the scribes abandoned the widows? Who is it whose lives have become even more difficult because of the actions of the church? Who is it that we have forced to degrade themselves as Ruth must do in today's first reading so that she might survive?

While there are unfortunately still more than a few groups we could name, the

most obvious answer is our gay and lesbian sisters and brothers, who are still not only being rejected by many churches, but scorned and ridiculed in vile and hateful language. In most places in America, gays are treated like widows in the first century. They also have no voice, unable to speak for their partner in life and after death. They still in some places cannot be on each other's medical insurance. They have no property rights or any other rights when their partner dies. It is still impossible for a domestic partner to make end of life decisions for their loved one in a hospital.

These laws remain in effect chiefly because of churches, who have put up millions and millions of dollars of donated money to fight any attempt to offer rights to gays the rest of us already enjoy. Two weeks ago, Congress passed and the President signed an extension of the hate crime bill that makes it a federal offense to attack people because of their sexual orientation. This, of course, sounds like a no brainer, especially for a Christian. But believe it or not, a significant portion of Christian leaders came out (pun intended) opposed to the law. My question is, no matter where one stands theologically on homosexuality, how could any Christian not be in favor of human rights for everyone? How could a Christian hear today's Gospel and not see that we are living right into what Jesus so vehemently protests today? Beloved, the central issue for us this morning is not holding up the widow as our model for donating to the church. The central issue is to respond to the injustice to which Jesus was responding. The central issue is that we never create another class of widows in the world ever again. We must be here to protect the rights and respect the dignity of every human being and if that is not our main goal as the church, then we are no

different than the scribes that Jesus attacks today. We have covered up the Gospel to fight a culture war, just as the scribes buried the heart of the Torah (caring for others), to follow the letter of the law.

Let us stand together therefore, and fight against every indignity that is ever thrust upon another human being, or for that matter, any part of God's Creation. Let us break down every social system that makes it impossible for an individual to escape poverty and does not offer each and every one of us the respect that we deserve. Let us give thanks for being in a church that has finally heard Jesus's call to care for the widow, regardless of the price it will cost. Yes, let us support our church in these efforts with our money, but let us never put money above the Gospel, above our need to bring dignity to every person everywhere. Amen.