

Being re-membered
Mark 12:38-44

This has never been one of my favorite stories. This story of Jesus watching a widow giving her last two pennies...it's always seemed like an impossible model to imitate. Really? The woman gave away all the money she had to live on. So what happened to her the next day? The next week? I'm not convinced.

And then Spirit whispered, "This story isn't about money. This is a story about poverty and abundance."

So if this story isn't about a privileged middle class and a widow giving their offerings, then what is it about?

One thing to notice is that Jesus is people-watching. He and the disciples are out and about in Jerusalem. He's been teaching and now he's sitting down, watching people come and go. He doesn't engage any of them...he's just watching them. And from his seat, he watches the well-to-do. It seems they have much...money, clothes, positions, prestige, social and material security. And they drop a lot of money into the offering plate. These are the people, and behaviors, that he'd just been talking about as he was teaching the crowds.

It *seems* that what Jesus and the disciples are watching is abundance, right? People who have much being generous. That's my immediate image of abundance.

But then we remember what Jesus was teaching: that people with power in the community were "devouring widows' houses." There is an *appearance*...an appearance of abundance. But it's not abundance. Their giving comes from money made by corrupt systems, systems that take advantage of and further oppress the poor, including this widow. We know this system. Our country's history is full of devoured houses. If we're white, many of us benefit from these stolen houses.

But Jesus isn't just watching those with money, he's watching every body. And he sees the widow. In sharp contrast to those dropping in lots of money, here's a widow, a poor widow. That brief description is all we need to know that she's alone, on the margins, without a support system. She's just getting by. And she gives her last two coins. If that isn't an image of poverty, then what is?

But if we keep our eyes on her, we begin to see her. And we see beyond her poverty. She's fearless. How could she have given everything? Where did she get such courage? What kind of inner resources did she have that she could walk in and drop her two coins right alongside those who were dropping 100 times more? Is this an image of poverty? Or abundance?

It seems that in this story, Jesus is challenging the disciples' assumptions...and ours...about poverty and abundance. In her poverty, the woman gave much. Surely *that* is abundance! Extravagance, even.

Another thing to notice is that in this story, Jesus is just days away from the cross. Where he too will give everything.¹ We talk about his self-giving, saying "he emptied himself" and we call it the "foolishness of the cross." This woman, a poor widow, foolishly gave everything, emptying herself. Some have identified her as a prophet—her self-giving foreshadowing Jesus' self-giving.

It's sometimes hard to put ourselves into these stories...because we're not giving our last coins away and we're not going to the cross, at least not literally. But surely this story is meant for us. Surely there is something for us to see and learn about poverty and abundance.

¹ I'm grateful to Debi Thomas in her 2015 post for identifying this woman as the "widowed prophet."
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/theeighthday/446-the-widowed-prophet>

So I'm going to bring this story very close to us. How have we at Fellowship of Hope experienced abundance and poverty? How have we, individually and collectively, been giving? Are we giving out of our abundance? Are we giving out of our poverty? Let me offer several images.

The Fellowship of Hope that I know and love is an incredible congregation with an abundance of generosity, hospitality, love, vulnerability, care for each other and neighbors, social activism, engagement in the neighborhood and community, deep and long faith and commitment to each other and to following Jesus. The list could go on. Fellowship of Hope shows up in so many places and in so many ways in this community, and in the broader Mennonite community. And so many people—MVSers and seminary students especially—have spent formative years at Fellowship of Hope. There is an abundance of resources in this small and mighty collective of people. Out of this abundance we've faced into our white privilege and our racism; we have meaningful relationships within our neighborhood and all the way to Gaza; our special offerings collect more money than seems reasonable for such a small congregation. Truly this is a congregation blessed with abundance and has given itself out of that abundance. This congregation has consistently responded to each other and to neighbors, here and around the globe, with amazing generosity.

But this collective also knows poverty. When the Apostolic Order broke and ended and persons left the community, it was a heartbreaking loss. Experiences of abundance turned to poverty. And in the last year or so, this congregation again finds itself in a season of poverty. We've been *taken* by world events, politics, violence, a pandemic, conversations about patriarchy, disagreements about congregational process, interpersonal conflicts. Like the poor widow who was also *taken* by her life's circumstances, we too are experiencing a poverty. And here is my question for Fellowship of Hope: Can we—as individuals and as a

congregation—can we follow the example of the widow and give everything? If not the woman, can we follow Jesus to the cross?

In going to the cross, Jesus gave everything. Out of God's abundant, gracious and gratuitous love within him, he gave everything for others. Can we, with the abundance of God's gracious and gratuitous love, give everything for each other? In this time of congregational stress and distress, when trust has turned to distrust, what would it look like if we started to give to each other out of our poverty? If we turned inward...drawing deeply on the life-creating and life-giving resources the Spirit of God makes available to us, and with the breath of God's Holy Spirit, we offered ourselves to each other?

I'm going to pause for minute, because my question isn't rhetorical...it's meant for us to consider.... With the Holy Spirit, can we draw on God's gracious and gratuitous love and like the poor widow, like Jesus, can we give everything to and for each other? *Pause.*

Can we bear to experience the depths of our poverty—our hurt, our anger, our despair? Can we imagine God entering into our deep poverty? And then, drawing from God's endless source of love and grace, can we imagine discovering an abundance we've never known? And a courage to give to each other what we didn't know we could give?

Again, I'm going to pause...and repeat the questions....

Dear ones...beloved...in communion, we *took* bread, we held it, then ate it. We did so remembering Jesus, our Living Bread. When we *take* Bread, we *take* Jesus so that when life's circumstances *take* us, we will be sustained by Living Bread. In communion we *take* and eat Living Bread. Jesus, our Living Bread, gave everything—he was taken, broken open, and given *to us*—so that when we eat, we grow in our capacity to be fearless and courageous. So that we grow in our capacity to love each other with God's gratuitous and self-giving love.

We eat Living Bread at communion so that we grow in our capacity to imitate and follow Jesus...even to the cross and tomb.

May the Living Bread that we shared nourish us, nourish the depths of our poverty, until we are re-membered.

May the Living Bread that we shared be an endless Source within us, so that when *we are taken*, we can eat from its abundance...with enough left over to share with each other.

May it be so.