

Mercy and Mite

Mark 12:38-44

At Noank Baptist, we are minimalists when it comes to money. What I mean is, we don't spend much time talking about it; we don't even get cranked up when our budget is running in the red. We don't have exhausting financial campaigns or harangue people for every last dime throughout the year. We only have a one annual fundraiser (e.g., Holiday Bazaar), which ends up being more about building community with one another than balancing our books.

We don't even distinguish between large and small donations. Nobody's name is branded on a bronze plaque for all to see, nor do we publish a list of patrons and benefactors. We don't promise you a mug or a tee shirt or a new set of DVDs based on the level of your contribution. In fact, we do everything contrary to the great minds of marketing and development. Typical to New England, we are as private about our money as we are about our religious faith.

Now it wasn't always this way. Since we're nearing the end of our 175th anniversary year, it's good to remind you what Noank Baptist once required of thee. According to our historical records, there was a time when our forbears made it quite clear how much each person gave to the church. One paid for status and privilege on earth as one hoped it would be in heaven. According to Mrs. Arthur Anderson—Jessie to her family:

Slips, as the pews were called, were sold at auction each year, bringing as high as \$30. High bidder was entitled to exclusive use of the pew for the entire year and it was a serious breach of courtesy for anyone to sit in a reserved pew. Reverse, or free, seats were available in the NW or NE corners at the front of the Church for those who could not bid for pews.

Deacons Robert Palmer and Roswell Fitch were always among the early bidders for choice seats. ¹

What I find quite interesting is that in most Baptist churches the cheap, or free, seats were actually in the back, which helps to explain a lot of things, including the stereotype of “Back Row Baptists”—a tradition that Howard and Mary Davis proudly maintained for a long time here in Noank (we’ve since removed the pew and bronzed it).

In any case, as is evident in many old New England meetinghouses (e.g., Boston’s Old North Church in particular), the rented pews (or box pews) were often made quite comfortable and elaborate—a sort of family showcase of one’s tastes and status. People nested in them, along with like birds of a feather. Everything from draperies to settees to foot warmers were provided for a family’s comfort and pleasure, since services would often last for hours on end in a drafty, unheated building. One paid for this privilege and displayed it well for others to gawk at with good Christian envy. With those privileges highlighted and fostered in many New England churches, the “free” ecclesiastical societies of Yankeedom were able to pay their preachers and keep themselves in God’s good graces.

But not so much here in Noank. Somewhere along the line, a great emancipating spirit freed this church from its focus on funds. Deacon Palmer, notwithstanding, pew rentals went the way of the Noank sloop. Every pew was transformed into an equal opportunity resting spot and all markings of privilege and status were downplayed, if not eliminated altogether. Even though we still seem to claim our preferred pews and views, now we enter and leave this

¹ Jessie Anderson, “Through the Years,” a brief history of Noank Baptist recorded for the 110th Anniversary celebration, June 24-28, 1953.

sanctuary without a clue as to what each person contributes nor what they are worth in the eyes of God, let alone their neighbors. It is a level playing field for all in the great economy of heaven.

We do this with civilized conscience, since the Good Book tells us that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” With this noble insight, Noankers did away with anything that might suggest some were better than others just because they had deeper pockets. We privately contribute in cash or with tiny, nondescript envelopes, with only God, us, and the Financial Secretary even privy to the amount we tender. And by the mercies of heaven, through economic recession and expansion, we have managed to keep this boat afloat.

Now, you may not realize this, but indirectly our approach to stewardship reflects the spirit of generosity and moral consciousness that Jesus sought in his own community and time. It isn't so much in the emphasis on privacy as it is on the nature of giving, where the needs of those with less are taken into consideration. Let me explain by exploring the story of the widow's mite to see if what I'm suggesting is true.

The scripture as we have it consists of two stories juxtaposed by Mark. The first was Jesus' observation and commentary on the practices of the Levitical scribes, where he clearly minced no words. He decried their pompous air, their self-aggrandizement, and certainly their expectation of public reward and respect. But the real issue for Jesus wasn't merely the scribes' self-importance; it was their callousness toward the poor: “They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” This requires a little explanation.

Scribes were, in effect, antiquity’s lawyers—experts in the law, conservators of both tradition and religious truths, and public administrators who handled legal issues in society. Aside from their public and religious duties, scribes usually made their living taking care of private legal concerns—often those associated with probate law and inheritance. When the head of a household died, a scribe might be contracted to parse out the inheritance among surviving family members.

In that patriarchal culture, if there were no sons or brothers to assume this responsibility, scribes often served as trustees of a household’s finances and, by having entire control over the process, routinely would compensate themselves with ample fees and charges that exploited the desperate circumstances of the vulnerable survivors. Since this was a part of doing business, there was little, if any, public scrutiny for this practice, other than consumer complaints. Everyone assumed scribes got rich off someone else’s losses.²

This then explains Jesus’ comment: “They devour widows’ houses...”, even while they made themselves out to be pious and ethically faithful. We can understand, then, why Jesus’ criticism was warranted against abusive practices of this type.

But then Mark associated Jesus’ criticism of the scribes with yet another story of an abusive practice, i.e., the financial burden the rich generally placed upon the poor in society, particularly for the upkeep and care of the temple. As the second story tells it, Jesus sat down opposite the temple treasury—in effect, the collection box located in

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis Books, 2010 edition, pg. 320.

the temple courtyard. The custom had every person make their weekly contribution as they were able and in front of others—except, their ability was markedly different, depending on their personal circumstances.

Keeping up the temple was an expensive proposition. There was the property upkeep itself, but then also compensation for the employees (priests, attendants, temple guards), as well as material needs, such as purchasing animals for sacrifices, priestly vestments, incense, and other religious artifacts. Running a public religious institution (even back then) was no small matter. Since the worship of God was dependent upon the institution, attendees paid their dues with tithes and offerings into the collection box.

According to Mark's story, Jesus observed the large sums that wealthy benefactors contributed which, of course, would have been notable to all and, as a result, would also garner the attention and great appreciation of religious leaders. That was often the intent. Money talks and, as a rule, has much to say in public.

Amidst these notable contributions, Jesus then observed a woman who clearly was left on her own, meaning she was most likely a widow and a target of exploitation by unscrupulous scribes. When she went forth to offer her required contribution, it consisted of merely two small coins (Gk. *lepta*)—"widow's mite" as we have come to call them—coins that in value were negligible, hardly worth more than a penny. To his disciples, Jesus made the following point:

Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

Relative to the rest, this woman gave more than she could afford and thus it was she who had made the greater sacrifice.

The conventional interpretation of this story is what seems apparent: Jesus was honoring the poor widow, blessing her because of her great sacrifice to the religious institution. She gave a greater percentage of her meager income, she is the model for true charitable giving, she is an example of extraordinary generosity and sacrifice—of the last becoming the greatest in the realm of God. Thus, she was honored by Jesus and for that, she serves as the veritable model for Christian charity.

However, this traditional interpretation misses an underlying point. As Mark has shaped the context, Jesus wasn't making an example of the woman's generosity—instead, his observations were that this widow couldn't afford it! What Jesus was highlighting was not how wonderful it was that the widow was making such a significant sacrifice; on the contrary, Jesus was lamenting what this poor woman was required to sacrifice for the sake of her religious life and, presumptively, for her relationship with God.

In other words, if we flip this around from our conventional interpretation, we'll see that Jesus was calling out a religious system that placed requirements on everyone to support it, even when it was beyond their ability to do so without severely impacting their lives. Unfortunately, there are many places which still do this very thing—some are churches, others are religious institutions of one type or another, and we see this frequently with TV evangelists and similar schemes that prey upon their followers to sacrifice what they have “to

give it to the Lord”, when in fact, it only is used to make these shysters rich.

This was Jesus’ lament: that the temple obligated people to give when they couldn’t afford to and, thus, added to the unjust burdens upon the poor that were already present in society, instead of compassionately lifting it from them and then advocating for their plight. Anyone’s gain at the expense of the poor is contemptible (vs. 40), unless it is more than matched by compassion and charity to help them find justice in life. Mercy was more important than mite!

Translating this into the present, I think it’s fair to say we do this remarkably well here in our church. Namely, financial contributions are always encouraged, but they are voluntary and certainly not demanded of those who can’t afford it. Our concern for justice is ongoing, even when the needs of the church are great. Our request for pledges and financial support doesn’t supersede our concern for mercy and justice. There isn’t a “business” side to the church that takes precedence over the “spiritual” side. Quite frankly, if making an offering is a hardship to you, then don’t feel obligated; the church is meant to be here for you! Others of us who are in a better financial position can make it up out of mercy and consideration, so all of us can benefit from this shared ministry. If we run short, we’ll simply cut back on our budget and make do. Making our proposed budget is a responsibility we share as a congregation, but it isn’t the most important aspect of our life together.

We approach our finances as a matter of faith and trust—trusting in each other and trusting God that we will have enough funds to support our staff and ministries and be good stewards of our

common property. Consider the blessings we receive in turn: quality of worship, the wonderful music, our children's program, the good company we keep, a beautiful meetinghouse, along with the various ministries and missions we serve and support—we've got an important part of each of our lives in this common investment we make in this church. It's a mercy to us, so we pay it forward to make it a mercy for everyone. That is how money becomes a means to build stronger friendships and a truly moral and spiritually lifting community. That is how we value stewardship as a matter of faith: give as you are able and do so with a grateful heart. In that spirit, may each of us invest our hearts into this ministry, where we're all on equal footing and where we are beneficiaries and benefactors of such a marvelous grace.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes
Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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