

**“THE POOR WIDOW’S WAY”**  
**November 9, 2003 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

Last week, when I was ill, my doctor asked me if I was under any stress. I looked at him and said, “I’m a parish priest and it’s stewardship time in the church.” This has never been my favorite time of the year. I struggle with calling people to their responsibility. At this time of year, I hear all the reasons why people can’t give. Money and giving are not our favorite subjects in the church. But stewardship is so vital to our faith.

Why do we not have much success here? It’s more than the economy is flat. Each year we seem to struggle with the budget. Instead of solid stewardship, we have had to turn to fundraisers to make up the difference in the budget. Each year we seem to wrestle with what will be cut. This year, we said we couldn’t afford a full-time clergy assistant. We don’t pay our full portion to the Diocese. We scramble on other things. Part of the reality is that we have lived on the generosity of others for much too long. It’s time we stepped up to our responsibility.

I have seen a parish be successful. The first parish I served in New Jersey was St. John’s in Montclair. When I arrived in that community, they told me this story about three of the Episcopal Churches in town: “St. Luke’s in Montclair is the old money church. St. James in Upper Montclair is the new money church. And we are the no money church!” This was a more middle class, blue-collar church that had little self-esteem. We made a commitment to work on stewardship. When I left that parish five years later, St. John’s had the highest average pledge per family of any of the Episcopal churches in town! Their average pledge, nearly 12 years ago, was more than our average pledge here today! Where is our faith? Where is our stewardship?

The most talked about subject in the Bible is money. There are nearly 2,000 passages on money, wealth or possessions. That’s nearly twice as money as on faith, 500, and prayer, 500. Jesus addresses the subject repeatedly! Why then are we so loath to talk about it? We still need money to operate our parish. The demands grow each year. Money represents many things to us, why does it feel that the parish always has to beg for it? Where is the joy in giving? Where is our faith?

Each year, most churches struggle to make their budgets. The Alban Institute and the Episcopal Network on Stewardship (TENS) say that if each member of the parish gave only 5%, we would double our budget! Think about that! Wouldn’t it be nice to worry about how to spend our money rather than what we will cut? The way we use wealth reflects our faith. The question we have to challenge ourselves with is, “Are we being responsible Christians?”

Today’s Biblical passage confronts us with the hypocrisy of the scribes. Jesus tells us to be ware the practices of the “religious” people. The scribes were not considered bad people. They were the Sunday going, sit in the pews folks of today. They were the ones who said prayers, read the Bible and studied their religion. But they were also one of the groups Jesus most often had problems with in his day. The scribes were the stuffed shirts, the super pious, the greedy and the superficial religious of Jesus’ day. They were all talk and no action. They were quick to point out the faults of others, but did nothing to examine their own practices.

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Now we see Jesus in the Gospel sitting at the Temple. He watches people coming and going with their offerings. There are some who give big gifts. But there is a problem here. These gifts do not represent any genuine self-sacrifice or self-giving. The gifts of these people are the leftovers, given from their surplus to the Temple. Jesus is not impressed with the amount. What does he see that captures his attention? We are warned about impressions in the Gospel today. Be ware the big flashy, attention giving people or offerings. It’s all for show.

I think of a wealthy parish I once served. It had the highest per capita of the county, nearly six figures! Their homes were the most expensive in the county. And yet, this community had the lowest giving in the Diocese, less than 1% of their income (the national average is 2.5%). What were the priorities of these people? I have heard it say the more money we make, the less we give away. We tend to hoard it. Where is God in the lives of these people?

Jesus challenges us to see a woman of faith’s offering. He invites us to embrace the poor widow’s way. “And she put in two copper coins, a penny ... she gave all that she had.” Jesus sees the faith of the widow. She didn’t have to give all she had ... she probably shouldn’t have ... but she did ... she gave God everything. This is the model of giving that Jesus confronts us with in our lives. This woman provides the model for the disciples of giving. Her gift is one of self-sacrifice, trust, complete and total giving. The widow’s gift went largely unnoticed. I doubt the disciples even saw her. The widow’s mite was a small monetary gift, but it was a large faith gift. Jesus saw and recognized what happened. Now it’s time we did the same.

We hear echoes of the widow from Zarephath and Elijah. She gave her last meal up to share with a stranger, a foreigner. Here is another woman who placed her trust in a man of God. Here also is the example of charity and generosity. Jesus challenges us to follow the example of the widow woman, not the wealthy scribes. What he proposes is so outlandish, we don’t understand. Do you know who widows were in Jesus’ day? They were the most vulnerable and powerless in society. Widows were not revered people, but the bottom of society. In Jesus’ day, women could hold no property, they had no social security, they did not receive pensions and they were not entitled to any inheritance. Everything went to the eldest son. If there was no son, it often was seized by the state. To be a woman in Jesus’ day was to be dependent upon a man, either your husband or son, to exist.

And yet, here she is, a widow. She puts in the offering everything she has. She probably received the copper coins while begging. Do you know what a copper coin would buy in Jesus’ day? You might be able to get a small crust of bread for a penny, if you were lucky. Everything this woman had she made as an offering to God. What does Jesus expect of us? He expects us to follow the poor widow’s way. We are to offer God everything we have!

Do you remember the Summary of the Law? We are told to fulfill the great commandments of loving God and loving others. Jesus expects us not just to talk about it, but also to do it! This poor widow loves God and gives God all she has ... now that is faith. What one of us could do the same? William Willimon, from Duke University, says in his commentary on

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this passage that the widow is a threat to us! She breaks down the idols of money, wealth and possessions that our culture holds up so high! What does Jesus expect of us? He expects it all, everything.

As Christians, we are to embrace a new vision of giving. There are no excuses for us not to give to the church or to be generous. God has been generous to us, now it is time for us to respond in kind. First, we can start where we are with our stewardship. It doesn’t matter if we begin with before or after tax income. Just start somewhere! We can strive to tithe (10%), or strive to make that 5% mark. We might check and see if we are even at the national average of 2.5%. One step of faith might be to increase our giving by 1% each year, starting this year. If we are to live our faith, our actions must speak as loud, if not louder, than our words.

George Gallup says that those who are most engaged in the life of a parish give the most. We need more people who are part of the parish. On average, most parishes see 25% of the people giving 75% of the money to help the church operate. This needs to change. More people have to be responsible in helping the parish to meet its expenses. The first challenge we might undertake is to increase the percentage we give, and increase the number of people giving!

Jesus points us to the way of the poor widow. She is one who gives sacrificially. The widow trusts God. Her giving is done out of faith, not to impress others. Maybe it’s time that we did the same. How do we begin? We must pray about our giving and then ACT! It’s time to increase our sharing with the church. Look at the examples of the poor. We can learn from them what’s important. Let’s make our words and actions match. It’s time to stop making excuses and start acting in faith. We can make a better world in God’s name. We can make a difference in our lives, the lives of our families and friends and those of others. We can be a great people of faith. We only have to trust God, listen to Jesus and then give.

Christ has no body now on earth but ours. No hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ’s compassion looks out to the world; ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which he is to bless people now. Christ has no body now on earth but ours. (Teresa of Avila 1515-1582).