

“Our Money Story - Reimagine”
Leviticus 19:9-10, 25:8-12; Mark 12:38-44
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The widow gives away everything she has - the model for pure generosity. Jesus lifts her up as the example to follow. That's the way most of us have heard this text. But while Jesus might be impressed by her faithfulness, he's not celebrating this moment. He's pointing out how corrupt the whole temple system has become. Almsgiving was required of the rich to make provision for the poor. It was intended as the latest iteration of what is an old, old concern in the Old Testament - how to prevent the most vulnerable from being hurt even more than they already are. That concern grows right out of Israel's own experience in slavery. A view from the underside of Pharaoh's successful machine.

Israel's experience shaped the Old Testament's conclusion that all economic systems, when left unchecked, move toward success for some at the expense of others. So all economic systems must be interrupted to protect against going back to Egypt in our practices and our policies. Harvesters are commanded to leave some of their crops in the field for the hungry to gather. And Israel is commanded to observe the sabbath so that everyone can remember each week that working all that time brings death to land and people. And every 49 years (7 X 7 for those who have forgotten their multiplication tables), the economic system has to equalize some of the inequalities that are sure to come to avoid, again, a return to Egypt. It's the big reset button that Israel builds into its system from its own experience of oppression.

This is Israel's money story. A story embedded so deep, that no one is above critique. So it's not surprising that when Jesus, formed and shaped by Israel's money story, looks on this widow's extraordinary gift, what Jesus sees is a vulnerable person getting fleeced by the very system that is supposed to be protecting her. He sees her getting hurt by the very system that was created to protect her. If you haven't been around Brown Memorial to hear preaching on this text and you're thinking, "wait, isn't this the widow's mite story that every preacher has used to squeeze a little more pledge out of pockets?" I thought Jesus was commending her gift? Even if you've been around here for awhile and it's your first time getting the message I don't blame you. For so long, the church has reinforced this widow's giving as an act to be emulated, that it's hard for us to see that the text is saying much more. Jesus is not simply commending the widow for giving everything she has - although he's certainly not condemning her for her generosity - he's pointing out that the whole structure that was setup to protect her has failed to do its job. The temple is not protecting the poor and its

leaders need to be held to account. This interpretation makes total sense in the context that we just read it. Jesus has just condemned the scribes for “devouring widows houses.” Instead of protecting those who are vulnerable, the leadership is taking advantage of them.

There are any number of directions where this text could lead us so let me just propose a few. The first is that the church has to always be on the lookout to get our own house in order. To make sure that our own practices are consistent with the ethics here. This means everything from compensating staff fairly, protecting their safety in these times especially, to building greening practices into our everyday habits. It’s a constant struggle particularly in a system where the cheaper route isn’t always the more just one. This is part of getting our house in order. A more difficult part is digging deeper into our own widow story. Brown Memorial was founded with a gift from a widow - a very wealthy one. And the more I’ve learned about Isabella Brown’s remarkable gift, the more I’ve learned that some of that Brown family fortune was made off the transatlantic slave trade. What does it mean to stand inside the remarkable beauty of our church building and hear enslaved people cry out from the very stones that were purchased with their labor? This is part of our church’s money story, too.

Reparations have to be on the table, yet I’ve already told some of you that it would be a mistake for our church to examine its own history in a bubble, give away a chunk of change in the name of reparations in order to feel better. If the driving force behind a historical reckoning is to improve the church’s image, then we’ve got the wrong driving force. Racism goes to the heart of all of our living. It is inside of us and outside of us. We live in a nation where many have benefitted off slavery, segregation, and other forms of racial injustice. As Ta-Nehisi Coates pointed out in his must-read article in the Atlantic in 2014, “the Pew Research Center estimates that white households are worth roughly 20 times as much as black households, and that whereas only 15 percent of whites have zero or negative wealth, more than a third of blacks do. Effectively, the black family in America is working without a safety net. When financial calamity strikes—a medical emergency, divorce, job loss—the fall is precipitous.” Coates highlighted the research of Patrick Sharkey, a sociologist at New York University, who studied children born from 1955 through 1970. “Sharkey found that 4 percent of whites and 62 percent of blacks across America had been raised in poor neighborhoods. A generation later virtually nothing had changed. And whereas whites born into affluent neighborhoods tended to remain in affluent neighborhoods, blacks tended to fall out of them.”¹

Coates says that when most Americans think of white supremacy, we picture “colored only” signs when what we should be picturing is pirate flags. Wealth that has

¹ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June, 2014, retrieved from the Internet on October 16, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

been stolen. What would it mean for America to face our money story not with defensiveness or shame, but with determination to change the direction of that story?²

And we could change the direction of that story if we chose to. We know how to prioritize home ownership among Black Americans - to build their wealth and rebuild our city with it. We know how to connect people who have been left out of the labor market with employers who can pay a living wage. We know how to attract the newest immigrants to our city and keep them in the city. We know how to close the so-called educational achievement gap. It's always about priorities.

COVID-19 has taught us all that if you didn't know it already. We can go for decades being told there's not enough resources to address poverty, to narrow educational inequities, to rebuild neighborhoods, to root out corruption from the police department. I've been lectured - sometimes by politicians, other times by business leaders - with the same old "not enough" arguments. Not enough to do this. Not enough to do that. Yet both during the housing crisis and then more recently with COVID 19, the powers that be find trillions of dollars overnight to address what they believe are our highest priorities.

Getting the church's house in order means getting our priorities clear. The best way to do that is by starting with your own life. We do stewardship season every year. And, chances are, many of us think about that as "the church's fundraising drive." And that is definitely part of it. But the invitation is way deeper than that. It's an invitation to press the reset button on your own priorities, your own practices, your own way of living. It's an invitation to look at what you care about most deeply, what breaks your heart and what then you will do with your one and precious life. For some of us that means painful choices on a path to change. For others it means recommitting to the path we are on. For others, it's somewhere in between. For all of us it is the invitation to reimagine the people, the church, the city, the nation we long to become.

That's a process, not a point in time. Which is why my appeal to us, when it comes to our congregation's history is to trust the leadership of Taylor Stewart and our antiracism working group in their Session-endorsed plans later this year to lead us all thoughtfully and deliberately through a process that is way more than just what you might think is right for us do to address the church's history as if you or I stands outside of us. A process that invites us to look at the church's history as it relates to our own living - not as individuals, but in relationship to each other - where we live, how our schools got to be the way they are, and how our social relationships are so fraught and frayed. You see, individualism isn't going to lead us to the promised land. We can't right the wrong of our history on our own. I think that's where some more liberal-minded interpreters of this text miss the mark. They interpret Jesus as anti-institutional. As someone who wants to tear down the temple. He's actually someone living in a time when the temple will be torn down, trying to give the community the vision to see that

² Ibid.

they have more options than they think. Options for reimagining how to organize themselves as the community of love and grace and justice they were called to be. Community that is necessary to change the world, redeem creation.

I had lunch with a young friend not too long ago, fresh out of college, looking for work. We talked about her priorities, her values, her dreams for how she wanted to use her life. I suggested that she look into a particular organization, she said, "They're not progressive enough on this." I suggested a different organization, she said, "I don't like their positions on this." We went through half a dozen organizations all of which weren't perfectly aligned with her values and I thought to myself, this is why it is so difficult for people who care about widows and orphans to do anything together beyond marching in the streets.

Jesus isn't tearing down institutions. He's calling us to reimagine them. And to reimagine our lives within them. And to reimagine the social arrangements that the church is called to shape with that old, old money story that makes the wellbeing of orphans and widows - any marginalized group - our chief economic indicator.

There's an old conviction taught in community organizing that you cannot build what you cannot imagine. I can't speak for you, but I need the church to help me reimagine my life. And I believe to my core that the city needs the church to do the same. The nation needs help learning how to build community, reweave the frayed fabrics of our time. To help us struggle against the tides that pull us to our corners by design.

That is the community that Jesus calls us to reimagine together. The community where we give and receive direction. It is a joyful, painful path! The path that leads to life!