

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I don't know about you, but it kind of warms the cockles of my heart when I hear of rich people giving their money away. However, for the most part, their giving is not necessarily sacrificial. Those who give greatly and generously often have more money than any of us will ever dream of. Still, it was most heartening to hear a few years back how Bill Gates and Warren Buffett enlisted 168 billionaires (yes, that's billionaires with a B) to join them in pledging to give away at least half of their wealth. Since then, they have funded everything from the arts to zoos. Their contributions have saved millions of lives, improved health, education, housing, and lifted millions out of poverty. Their generosity has led to break-throughs in addressing problems like climate change, water purification, and countless other issues that affect the world's well-being. At the same time, many millions of their dollars have been used to fund abortions, stem cell research using human fetuses, and other less worthy pursuits. However, all-in-all, their altruism is laudable.

One day Jesus saw a group of wealthy men lining up to give a portion of their wealth at the Temple in Jerusalem. They were making a big show of presenting their offerings. They, perhaps like the afore-mentioned billionaires, wanted people to be aware of their charity. They used large coins so that when they fell into the box an impressive clanging sound could be heard by all.

Of course, such demonstrations of public piety and generosity were not restricted to the first century. Today many wealthy people love to see their names on libraries, public buildings, foundations, scholarships, even church halls, and the like. Don't get me wrong. Society benefits greatly from such generosity. But these generous donors largely will still have on hand more money than they could ever spend. Sometimes, they even come out ahead because of the tax breaks their generosity affords them. Their giving is unlike the poor widow who got Jesus' attention.

She had only two coins to her name (we refer to it as "the widow's mite"), with the value of a penny, that she placed in the offering at the Temple. That was all she had and chose to give it to God.

No one in the crowd even noticed her giving her offering. They were largely enamored by the finery of the wealthy donors. But Jesus did. Jesus noticed.

He called his disciples and said to them, "...this poor widow put in more than all the other contribution to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

Did you catch that? According to Jesus, her offering was more significant than that of Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and the other 168 billionaires, because God measures not how

much you give, but how much you have left over. If your giving is not sacrificial, God is not impressed.

Jesus praises this poor widow because she put her money where her heart was. She loved God. She loved His Temple. She gave all she had, putting all her trust in God.

Consider with me, for a moment, what motivated such devotion, such faith. To be widowed in the time of Christ would have been a frightening prospect. Women not only could not own property; they were considered the property of their husbands. If this widow was childless and her husband had not left an heir, his property would have been dispersed to various relatives and she would have been left basically homeless, dependent perhaps on the charity of whatever family or friends she had.

Perhaps you are aware of the ground-breaking sensitive work of a psychiatrist named Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a pioneer in near-death studies. In 1969 she authored a book entitled *On Death and Dying*.

In this book she first described the five stages of dying, which are replicated in the process of grieving the loss of a loved one. The five stages she identified are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These provide the framework, not only for dying, but also help us go on living after we lose someone we love.

Some people pass through these stages quite easily; others sometimes get bogged down in one of these stages of grief and can't get beyond it. Consider for a moment that stage of anger. It's not unusual for a person who has lost a loved one to be angry—sometimes angry at the person who died (How could you have left me like this?); sometimes angry at themselves (If I had only listened...or if I had only done things differently...); and sometimes angry at God (Where were you when we needed you; why have you performed miracles for others but not for us; why didn't you spare him?).

Let us imagine for a moment that this poor widow had been bogged down for some time in this anger stage, gradually found her way into bargaining, hoping for a better deal for herself; slipped into depression at her fate; and had finally come to acceptance of God's will for her husband, and for herself.

So she comes to the Temple, drops her two coins in the offering, saying something like, "I've come to terms with my grief. I accept my sadness, loneliness, and brokenness. Here I am God. Do with me what you will."

That's what Jesus saw in this poor widow—her absolute trust in God—that's what he loved in her. She trusted that however she survived that day would be through the provision of God.

There are still people around that do that. I'm reminded of a friend who had built up a very successful business with a partner with whom he had been friends since college. However, even as their business was booming, he found out that his partner, his friend, was sexually harassing, not only their female employees, but their clients as well. He confronted his friend, who at first denied the accusations, but eventually was forced to admit the truth. My friend told him he would have to go for counseling and could no longer interact with the women he had harassed. For a time things went well, but, within a year, he was back at it. My friend told him he could no longer work with him. He offered to buy out his partner or told him he would sell his share in the company. His friend refused either proposition. So, my friend simply walked away from what had become a multi-million dollar company.

When his wife asked him, "What are we going to do?" He simply said, "It was the right thing to do. So, we're going to trust God." At 60 years old, he mortgaged his house, took all their savings, and started all over again, forming his own company." He recently retired at 80 years of age, a multi-millionaire, and turned the company over to his son. Proving that when you put all your trust in God, it gets God's attention, and He will not disappoint.

Coming back to the poor widow, there is one other thing that may have motivated her—her love and devotion for God's House. She believed in the work of God. We know from the Gospels and the treatment of Jesus by the High Priest and the cohort around him that they were a venal, self-serving bunch. But the poor widow didn't pay them much attention. She knew the Temple was where people found refuge and hope and faith and love. So, despite those in charge, she supported the work of God that went on in the Temple with her last penny. That too had to be pleasing to God.

I want to believe that by dropping those coins in the box brought great joy to the heart of that poor widow. In doing so she realized that she was part of something bigger than herself. She was participating in God's work on earth. She had become victorious over her grief. She trusted God with her daily bread. And she was involved in the ongoing work of God's Kingdom. Is it any wonder that Jesus praised her?

In God's eyes that poor widow gave more than Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and 168 other billionaires combined. Perhaps we need to consider is our giving like that of the Billionaires Club, giving from our excess, or is it like that of the poor widow, giving sacrificially from our substance out of faith and trust and love for the God of our salvation, knowing that such giving is what is pleasing to God.