

Theologian, Marcus Borg, in his excellent book *The God We Never Knew* wrote:

The point is not that Jesus was a good guy who accepted everybody, and thus we should do the same (though that would be good). Rather, his teachings and behavior reflect an alternative social vision. Jesus was not talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.

Well, in today's gospel lesson we find Jesus doing just that as he critiques the Temple establishment and leverages a direct attack on the Temple system. In this story, we see Jesus again in the Jerusalem Temple for one last time before his death. It is the Tuesday of what we now call Holy Week. He has been teaching and condemning religious leaders because the Jerusalem Temple had become an **economic** establishment as well as a religious establishment. It functioned as a financial banking institution. The system that was in place financed the Temple priests and scribes who benefited from the system's unscrupulous, dishonest practices. The Temple system was so corrupt it employed practices of economic violence upon the poor.

Jesus slams the scribes who “devour widow’s houses.” These scribes were religious scholars and lawyers. They were not just copyists. They were highly educated people and they were very wealthy. They received a cut from each Temple sacrifice and money from the various Temple offerings, offerings that might better be described as Temple taxes. As Jesus teaches we hear him say, “Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flatter, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get.” (*The Message*)

Jesus’ critique of the scribes and the Temple system does not end there. After describing the manner in which the scribes bankrupt widows, he sat down across from the treasury where people came to give their offerings. People would throw their money into one of 13 flute-shaped chests, stating the amount of their gift and the purpose for which it was given. Jesus contrasts the “many rich who were throwing in large sums of money” with the poor “widow” who threw in two little insignificant coins. The Greek words used to describe this woman convey a widow who is the poorest of the poor, a widow

reduced to begging. Jesus tells his disciples, “This poor woman has given more than anyone, for all threw out of their abundance, but she threw out of her want, all she had, her whole life.”

It is important at this point that we understand the status of widows in this ancient culture. Becoming a widow was the fate most feared by a woman. Widows were people with no means of support. They didn't own property. They usually didn't have any way to earn money. They were people on welfare -- living off handouts from society or family. When a woman's husband died, she could go back to her own family -- if they would pay for her. Otherwise she would have to stay with her husband's family, and was usually given very low and humiliating jobs. She was an extra burden on them.

Far too often the story of this poor widow has been interpreted as a story in which the woman shows exemplary faith and profound stewardship. However, we miss Jesus' point if that becomes our understanding of this passage. Jesus' words do **not** provide penetrating insight into good stewardship or the measuring of gifts. In fact, there is no word of praise in Jesus' statement about this widow. No, Jesus **condemns** the **value** system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it. Jesus'

words to the disciples are words of **lament**. He **laments** that this beggar widow represents the on-going exploitation of the poor by the Temple elite. You see, this story illustrates the way institutional religion manipulates this poor generous woman into parting with what little she possessed. Jesus does not lift the beggar-widow up as an example, or suggest that anyone ought to emulate her. She is not a positive example, but rather the barely living representative of a crying shame. Jesus is decrying the circumstances that demand her to make such an offering, a sacrifice that will likely lead to destitution if not death. She is a “victim of the temple system, a system that we will be told in the next chapter of Mark will come tumbling down.....And, this woman’s gift of all is quite significant and telling in Mark’s storytelling. In many ways, this widow and her action foreshadows what is to come. And what is to come is the crucifixion of Jesus. Her action anticipates what **Jesus** will do. He will be the poor, the forgotten, the abandoned, a victim of the system. He will give up **all** things.” (David Lose)

When we hear Jesus’ words, we cannot **help** but hear them as an attack on the system. I think we must be willing to hear them, not only as critique of religious systems and institutions, but also as

critique of the economic, governmental and political systems in which we live and function. And, when I hear these words, I find I have to face an element of critique. I am an ordained minister, ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. I am one who lives as a religious teacher. I walk around in long robes. When I wear my clerical collar I find I am treated differently. As a church leader, I find I am treated with respect and seated at head tables at banquets. I usually get first place in line at various church potlucks. I make my living by working within the religious system. My wages come from that very system. As a Pastor, I find I identify more with the privileged scribes than the impoverished, beggar widow.

So, where is the good news in today's reading? Well, I cannot help but believe the good news is the fact that Jesus reveals to us a God who cares about this woman, cares about her plight and her sacrifice. The God we see in Jesus will not tolerate such abuse, economic or otherwise, especially under the pretext of religious piety. And even more, this God is inviting us to look around and really see the impoverished, the desolate, those in anguish and despair and **advocate** for a system that does **not** leave anyone behind!

A Pastor friend of mine, Bill Uetricht, says, “As I confront Jesus and the Christian message I have to wonder if he is not taking us to a whole new system—could I put it, a whole new way of being church? With him, the center of being church, it seems to me, is the widow, this woman who is said to have given away all that she had.”

This new way of being the church centers in on what my friend calls, the “vulnerability of God.” As such, we follow one who is abandoned by all as he makes his journey to the cross. We follow the one who chooses ultimate abandonment and vulnerability as he proclaims, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” In that abandonment and vulnerability, God enters into complete solidarity with us. To be the church is to live in the community of faith that God creates, not a system or institution we create. To be the church is to live and share in the community of faith where we have been grasped by God. To be the church means living together as those who are broken, vulnerable, forgiven and loved. And, that forgiveness and love shown to us by this vulnerable God, changes us. To be the church means to live, participate and share in a movement where this God who has become vulnerable is changing and transforming the world through love.