

Rich? Or Poor?

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Teaching in the temple, Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "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." - Mark 12:38-44

I wonder how you and I would respond this morning if we were asked for a show of hands indicating how many of us think of ourselves as rich, and how many of us think of ourselves as poor. What values and what liabilities would you or I include on the balance sheets of our lives? How many of us would be comparing *my* net worth to *your* net worth?

Rich? Or poor?

Rich and poor came into focus on Easter Day 1946 for a 14-year-old girl by the name of Eddie Ogan. The pastor of her church had asked all households to save up money for a special offering to help out a poor family. Eddie and her two sisters and her mother answered the call. They figured out a dozen different ways to save or raise money. They ate only potatoes. They took on cleaning jobs. They sold hand-made potholders for a dollar each.

On Easter Day, when the special offering for the poor family was taken up, Eddie's mother put in a ten dollar bill; Eddie and her two sisters each put in a twenty—seventy dollars in total! *"We sang all the way home from church ...*

"[But] late that afternoon, the minister drove up in his car. Mom went to the door, talked with him for a moment, and then came back with an envelope in her hand. We asked what it was, but she didn't say a word. She opened the envelope and out fell a bunch of money. There were three crisp twenty dollar bills, one ten dollar bill ... and seventeen one dollar bills.

"Mom put the money back in the envelope. We didn't talk, just sat and stared at the floor. We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling poor."

We had gone from feeling like millionaires to feeling poor. We can all feel the poignancy of that moment. They had felt like millionaires, Eddie explains, because the home was always filled with family and friends, all in need, and all giving and sharing to get by. "We thought it was fun to share silverware and see whether we got the spoon or the fork that night ..." But a serpent had slithered into Eddie Ogan's home by way of that envelope of cash. *"That Easter day," she writes, "I found out that we were [poor]. I looked at my dress and worn-out shoes and felt so ashamed."*

In this story, Eddie Ogan is coming of age about our human concept of net worth, what we include on our balance sheets, or not, what we value, or not, and why. Jesus regularly meddled in these same universal concerns in his teachings and encounters. He often calls people out, in particular, on questions of money -- not to shame them but when it appears necessary for their true and ultimate well-being—what we Christians call our salvation.

Consider the rich man whom Jesus confronted in the gospel that we heard a few weeks ago. He had all the right answers, good theology, impeccable ethics. But Jesus saw where the man is still holding out: *"You lack one thing,"* Jesus says, *"go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you'll have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* When [the man] heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions." (Mark 10:21b-22) Without his money and his many possessions, his whole identity would have been annihilated.

The widow and her offering of the two coins in today's gospel provide a provocative contrast to the rich man. He could not give up anything; she gives up everything. She does so anonymously. She is not looking for her name to be added to a donor list or a tax deduction.

The contrast between the rich man and the widow illustrates a line from Richard Foster's book, *Money, Sex and Power*: *"God's ownership of everything ... changes the kind of question we ask in giving. Rather than, 'How much of my money should I give to God?' we learn to ask, 'How much of God's money should I keep for myself.'" The difference between these two questions is ... monumental ...*¹ It's a monumental difference that the rich man could not apparently comprehend but that the widow had apparently internalized and practiced.

On that Easter Day in 1946 when Eddie Ogan thought she had become poor, she still had more to learn—as I suppose we all do. After a week of shame and brooding, her mother dragged her daughters back to church the following Sunday. A guest missionary talked about the need to build churches overseas: *"One hundred dollars would put a roof on a new church."* The pastor chimed in: *"Can't we all sacrifice to help these poor people?"*

Recalling her family in the pew at that moment, Eddie Ogan writes, *"We looked at each other and smiled for the first time in a week. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out the envelope" from Easter day with 'the money for the poor family.'* Mom *"passed it to Darlene. Darlene gave it to me. I handed it to Ocy. Ocy put it in the offering.*

*"When the offering was counted, the minister announced that it was a little over one hundred dollars. The missionary was excited. He hadn't expected such a large sum ... 'You must have some rich people in this church!' Suddenly it struck us! We had given eighty-seven dollars of that 'little over a hundred dollars' ... From that day on, I've never been poor again."*²

Some of you must wonder, as I sometimes do, why the most poignant gospel texts having to do with money always seem to crop up in the fall, as clergy and church leaders are asking for our financial commitments for the coming year. There may in fact be some hidden scheme of which I'm unaware. Another explanation may be that we only have a few more weeks in the liturgical year. We are nearing the end of our journey through the Gospel of Mark that we began last year on Advent. Jesus has now arrived at Jerusalem. He is seeking the full attention of those who have believed, who have been following him, and who believe that they are prepared to follow him all the way there. Jesus is urging them all – and he is urging us, both rich and poor, by whatever measure – to count the cost.

¹ From *Seeking the Kingdom: Devotions for the Daily Journey of Faith*, Harper Collins, 2010.

² The full story is published in a variety of sources, including *Stories for the Heart, Book 3*, edited by Alice Gray, Multnomah Press, 2001, pp. 213-216, and may also be found by Internet search engines.