



Lent 3, 15 March 2020  
Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44  
Show us Justice  
First Mennonite Church

No, I'm not Arlyn Friesen Epp, the director at CommonWord in Winnipeg.

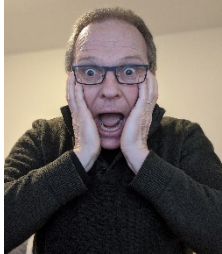
I'm sorry if you came to church this morning excited to hear Arlyn speak and



are now deflated as you get

me. He is, after all, a chap originally from Hauge; I'm only from Winkler! I'm not sure if I remember this correctly, but I think it's somewhere in the Bible where Nathanael asked Philip, *can anything good ever come out of Winkler?*

Arlyn was just about ready to leave Winnipeg for Saskatoon when he heard the ADS was cancelled. He called me Thursday at noon saying he was very sorry he couldn't be here.



He asked me to wish you God's blessings. After the phone call, I thought: Okay, now what are we going to do? Is there a preacher in the house, I thought to myself?

Yeah, I guess there is—and that preacher is me. Things happen and we need to adjust and be flexible.

This morning's theme is justice. **Show us Justice.**



A good way to begin thinking about justice is to look at this challenging

passage of the widow's offering. This story comes on the heels of Jesus' strong criticism of the scribes. These are stories of contrast: a poor widow on the one hand and the



richly clothed scribes on the other; two small coins, and hallowed seats of honour; crushing poverty and lavish, over-the-top affluence.<sup>1</sup>

The contrasts couldn't be starker.

Why the contrast? What is Jesus, and in turn Mark, trying to tell us?

Many of us have heard this passage preached in a **stewardship sermon**. Usually preachers interpret this passage in terms of contrasting levels of piety or faithfulness—comparing the unfaithful attitude of the scribes with the righteous gift of the widow.

“Beware of the scribes,” Jesus says. Their long robes and marketplace greetings, their synagogue seats and banquet place settings. Their long prayers. Their false piety.



On the other hand, look at the poor widow. She gives her last 2 coins to the temple treasury. Though it's the smallest of contributions and stands in stark contrast to the grand sum others bring, she gives everything—a faithful, generous, sacrificial offering.

The stewardship lesson is simple: don't be like the rich and haughty, but resemble the poor: make sure your attitude is humble and give sacrificially.

At first glance that might seem to be an accurate reading. “This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury – she has put in everything she has—all she has to live on.”

Isn't that exemplary? I suspect we've heard this passage explained this way before.

It even seems to lend itself nicely to a Lenten theme of personal devotion and individual sacrifice. A widow who gives up much more than chocolate or coffee for Lent—she gives up everything, everything she has. A sign of true piety and faithfulness, right?

Don't get me wrong. **I'm not saying we should not live generously.** No. Christ, in fact, calls us to live generously. All I'm saying is that this passage is not about pious giving. It's not about giving what you can to the church offering, even if it's nothing more than the widow's two coins.

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<sup>1</sup> The interpretative ideas for this sermon are indebted to Ched Myer's commentary on the gospel of Mark, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.

If this story is not about contrasting the false piety of the scribes and rich with the faithfulness of the widow and poor, then what it is about? I suggest that this passage is about contrasting the arrogant wealth of the scribes with the poverty of the widow.

When Jesus pointed out the widow to the disciples, Jesus doesn't praise her for her sacrificial giving. How can the widow's act of giving her last two coins—everything she has—be considered praiseworthy? No, it was NOT good. In fact, it was sad and tragic. The widow was really a victim of a system that robbed her of the very last coins she had.

Jesus' comment to his disciples, upon watching the crowd, "Truly I tell you; this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury," can also be interpreted this way:

"Truly I tell you, unlike the rich who appear to give much, but actually benefit from the system, this widow is poor because the system demands of her everything she owns."

Further, Jesus says – and I can almost hear the lament in his voice, "She has put in everything she has. What will she live on now?"

If this interpretation is right, then the two coins are not a sign of piety but a sign of injustice. Not a sign of self-sacrifice but a sign of victimization. Not an offering, but a tax on the poor. What kind of system forces the poor to give everything they have?

Do you see the difference?

I don't think this passage is the best choice for a stewardship sermon. Focusing on the widow's generosity ignores or leaves out the previous verses where Jesus rebukes the scribes just prior to the widow's offering. Jesus says this:

*"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 honour at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."*  
(Mark 12:38-40)

Jesus draws attention to the one person no one is noticing. Of course, she gives all she has. But it's not right nor just that such a system exists where some only give a small proportion of what they have while others have to give everything.

In Psalm 146, we're invited to think of God's justice as being like two sides of a coin. On one side, God's justice is shown in a positive way by care for those who are weak and oppressed: prisoners, blind, bowed down, aliens, widows and fatherless. These persons are the objects of God's positive justice. On the other side of this justice coin, God's justice punishes those who oppress the needy: God brings the way of the wicked to ruin. It follows that God's people are to pursue God's justice.

I've been following this coronavirus story well before it became a global pandemic. I subscribe to a China news feed, so I began seeing stories about an unknown flu in Wuhan China in December already. I was immediately interested because it sounded a lot like the SARS virus in 2003 when the Sudermans lived in Beijing.



Anyway, there have been many good suggestions, including Heidi's recommendations earlier, for how we're supposed to behave during this pandemic. We're encouraged not to shake hands. There have been stories of people touching shoes or bumping elbows. We're also encouraged to wash our hands more often, not touch our face with our hands, which is really hard to do when you have an itchy nose or

eye. These suggestions are not meant to cause panic; rather, they are meant to keep us far enough apart so that we reduce the risk of getting sick, and so we all don't get sick at the same time and completely overwhelm our health care system. Another very good and well-meaning suggestion to the workforce is, if you feel unwell, stay at home.



If you feel unwell, stay home. It's really good advice. It's good for people who draw a monthly salary or for those who have jobs where they can work from home. But what about those who work part-time, have an hourly wage, or those who, if they aren't out there working have no income whatsoever coming into the household? What about the working poor? How are they supposed to buy groceries, pay their rent, their heating or other bills? How will they do these things if they must stay at home?

One of the things I'm very grateful for everyday, but especially these days when we are the middle of a global pandemic, is our universal healthcare system. There are many things to be concerned about these days. (I'm going to resist my urge to comment on stock-piling hand-sanitizer or toilet paper). But if I came down with a fever and needed

to get a Covid-19 test, I wouldn't have to pay for it. Neither would the person who is working from pay cheque to paycheque or the family who is just getting by.

It's amazing to me how a tiny invisible virus can expose gigantic cracks in our social safety net. And always, when these cracks appear, they negatively impact the ones who are least able to adapt and adjust—to stay at home if they are sick.

Scribes were focussed on **themselves**, were concerned with their wealth and power to the detriment of others, especially the widows and orphans. Too focussed on their own needs to consider the needs of others in the community. Jesus stands within the Jewish prophetic tradition where the **well-being of the community** was paramount. **Justice was the measuring stick** for how well the community took care of the widow and the orphan. *You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry,* says God in Exodus 22:21.

Widows and orphans represent the poor, weak, and marginalized in Israel. It's them which face the daily hardships of providing food and shelter for their families. It's them who don't have any financial cushion to survive when they get sick. It's them who are also more susceptible to mistreatment and discrimination, and therefore need special consideration and support. Widows and orphans are the ones who couldn't just stay home if they were feeling unwell.

By condemning the scribes, those of power and influence and pointing out the widow, Jesus reminded the disciples that in God's economy, we must move beyond just thinking about ourselves to being concerned about and even imagining a community where the poor and weak can work, make a living wage, aren't stuck with a minimum wage that requires them to work at 2-3 part-time jobs just to make ends meet. This is not a just system, but an unjust one.

Barbara Ehrenreich, a US author, once wrote:

“Shame on our dependence on the underpaid labour of others. When someone works for less pay than she can live on—so she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you. The working poor are the major philanthropists of our society.”



When I lived in China, I saw first hand how people became extremely wealthy on the backs of millions of poor migrant workers. The Pharaoh in Egypt grew wealthy on the backs on the Hebrew slaves. The scribes' long fancy robes and pious prayers were built on the back of the widow.



It's not enough to pray for the poor or give a small portion of our income

to the poor. **God's justice** requires us to wrestle with the very difficult question about why we even have poor people in the first place. Helder Camara, a Brazilian Catholic Archbishop, once said, **When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.**<sup>2</sup>

I'm pleased our government is working on ways to help those who won't earn an income if they stay at home. It doesn't address the bigger question why we have poor, but it's a tiny step towards justice.

God's justice requires measuring the health, the well-being, the Shalom of our community not by how religious we act, nor by how pious our prayers sound, nor by how long our robes are, nor by our GDP, nor by how many millionaires we have, but by **how we care for the poorest and weakest in our society.**

Jesus shows us justice. But the justice he speaks about was as unpopular then as it is today. One of the reasons Jesus was killed was because of what he said and did. We need to be reminded often to look out for the most vulnerable rather than worrying about holding on to our privilege. Words like the prophet Micah need to ring in our ears:

*The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?  
(Micah 6:8)*

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<sup>2</sup> Helder Camara, Brazilian Catholic Archbishop (February 7, 1909 - August 27, 1999)