

MITE MAKES RIGHT

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Monday, November 1, 2021 William Neil “Doc” Gallagher was sentenced in Fort Worth, Texas to three life prison sentences for defrauding many elderly people out of anywhere from \$50,000 to \$600,000 in a Ponzi scheme. According to Lori Varnell, chief of the Tarrant County District Attorney’s Elder Financial Fraud team, “Doc Gallagher is one of the worst offenders I have seen.” What Doc Gallagher did was appalling. But what makes it especially reprehensible is that he and his Gallagher Financial Group advertised on Christian radio shows and used the tagline, “See you in church on Sunday!” As a “Christian” radio host himself, he promoted his company and his books, such as “Jesus Christ, Money Master.” Here’s how Lori Varnell summed up the tragedy and offensiveness of Gallagher’s scheme: “He ruthlessly stole from his clients who trusted him for almost a decade. He amassed \$32 million in loss to all his clients and exploited many elder individuals. He worked his way around churches preying on people who believed he was a Christian.”¹

I did not go looking for that story about Doc Gallagher to use as an opening illustration in today’s sermon. It showed up in the daily news feed on my phone Wednesday morning. I couldn’t help but be struck by the timeliness of reading that story just before I headed to the church to lead a morning Bible study on today’s gospel story about the scribes and the widow’s offering in the temple. When I read Lori Varnell’s comment, “He worked his way around churches preying on people who believed he was a Christian,” I thought, “How ironic is that!” Listen again to Jesus’s description of and warning about the scribes and their practices in v. 40: “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Most scholars interpret that to mean that Jesus accused the scribes of using their long “praying” as a religious cover to defraud the widows – sort of like Doc Gallagher “preying” on people who believed he was a Christian.

And there is the connection between what could be two, short, separate stories about pretentious scribes and a poor widow. Jesus accuses the scribes of devouring widows’ houses. Obviously, they didn’t eat the houses. Still, it doesn’t sound good. Somehow, they must have bilked the widows who, along with resident aliens and orphans, are considered among the most vulnerable, at risk, and marginalized people in Jesus’s day (and, still today, when you think about it). Following closely on that accusation, Jesus calls attention to a poor widow who “put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” In that light, it becomes pretty clear that Jesus uses the widow’s offering as the perfect illustration of his critique of the scribes’ pretentious piety.

The news article about Doc Gallagher’s Ponzi scheme noted that some of his victims “had to sell their homes, borrow money from their children or take part-time jobs to supplement their Social Security benefits.” The poor widow in the temple wasn’t

even able to do that. The crowd who put money and the rich people who put lots of money in the temple offering box gave from what they had left over, their discretionary money – literally, “money they would never miss.” But the poor widow, “she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

Now, if we had only heard about the widow’s offering this morning (with no reference to the scribes), we would be primed for a feel-good stewardship sermon. Plenty of those sermons have been preached through the years. I’ve probably done my fair share. In a nutshell, that sermon would go something like this: Consider the poor, faithful widow. She gave **everything** to the church. Go and do likewise. We sort of like those kinds of sermons – to hear them and to preach them. We’d like to be like the widow. We admire the widow. But we don’t do what the widow does. I’ve never put in everything I have, all that I have to live on, and I don’t think I’ve ever met anybody who has.

As biblical scholar John R. Donahue notes, “The [story], however, contains no explicit praise of [the widow’s] action – an action that seems to accomplish the very thing the scribes were accused of fostering. Recently Jesus’ statement has been interpreted as a ‘lament’ where Jesus points to the woman as an example of the exploitation of widows. Paraphrased it would read, ‘What I say is true [about the scribes]. This poor widow with nothing to spare gave everything.’”²

Perhaps you learned this story as “the widow’s mite” – M I T E – as the King James Bible puts it, “she threw in two mites which make a farthing.” Well, there never has been a coin called a “mite.” “Mite” is just a contraction of the Latin word *minutum* which means “small, insignificant, petty.” The widow didn’t reach into the pocket of her robe and pull out two coins called mites. But she did probably pull out two of the smallest coins ever minted in any society. Coin experts and archaeologists estimate that a “mite” (or *lepton*) was worth about 1/64 of a day laborer’s wages in Jesus’s time. They think the widow could have bought three grapes with her coins. Although it’s hard to get a true valuation of ancient coins in today’s dollars and cents, those same experts suggest one lepton or mite would be worth about 1/8 of a penny. In other words, she gave out of her nothing – certainly not out of her abundance that she would never miss – and even the nothing she had she gave away.

So much for a feel-good, inspiring story about being like the widow. But that doesn’t mean this can’t be a stewardship sermon, just in an unexpected but even more foundational way than meeting another annual budget. Do you remember today’s epistle lesson from James? It was about being doers of the word and not hearers only. It was about hearing God’s Word and remembering what it calls us to do. It was about persevering in the perfect law of liberty and being doers who act. And it ended with this verse: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (James 1:27)

The scribes in the temple would have known that’s what pure and undefiled religion was supposed to look like and do – but they didn’t do it. And that’s the whole point of Jesus’s rebuke of them. Their scriptures (what we call the Old Testament) were full of God’s instructions to care for the orphans and the resident aliens and the widows among them, in very specific, tangible ways: leave some wheat in your fields when you

reap, so they'll have something to eat; don't pick every grape and olive off the plants, but leave some for those folks to gather; defend the orphan, the alien, and the widow against injustice, such as (to use the language of Jesus's rebuke) "devouring their houses." At the great covenant renewal and rededication ceremony narrated in the 27th chapter of Deuteronomy, we read, "Then the Levites shall declare in a loud voice to all the Israelites: 'Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'" (Deuteronomy 27:14, 19)

So, the scribes knew what God and the law required of them – "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." But they apparently weren't doing that. Instead, they were covering themselves with a veneer of religious practices such as long prayers while they neglected to do what their God and their law and their positions of responsibility required of them. That's why Jesus denounced them and called attention to the poor widow who was a living example of what happens when we forget or neglect to follow the Great Commandment to love God with everything we have and are and to love our neighbors (such as the orphans and the aliens and the widows) as we love ourselves.

Now that makes for a good stewardship sermon! When I planned my fall preaching back in August and decided to use the lectionary readings from the gospel of Mark, I had no idea the session would call a congregational meeting during budget season for the same Sunday I would preach on the widow's mite. God's timing must surely be at work! Being good stewards is so much more than making sure the budget balances at the end of the year, although that's certainly a part of it. Good stewardship is not raising money to pay the bills, although the bills have to be paid. Good stewardship is using what God gives us to do what God asks of us. Good stewardship is all about loving God with everything we've got and being as concerned about our neighbors and their needs as we are about our own.

An April 12, 1975 newspaper article from the Dallas, Texas *Morning News* (interestingly enough, considering Doc Gallagher of Fort Worth being in this week's news) was entitled "Down to Earth: Offering Showing Value of Religion?" The article contained this sentence: "Show me your checkbook stubs," some wise one has declared, "and I will tell you what kind of person you are and, furthermore, how Christian you are."³ Billy Graham said, "Give me five minutes with a person's checkbook, and I will tell you where their heart is." And an even more general statement puts it this way: "The checkbook and the calendar never lie."

Certainly, the Christian life and faith involve much more than our checkbooks and calendars, but those are two very important ways we express and live out our Christian faith. The same principle underlies Jesus's denunciation of the scribes. He wasn't criticizing religious practices and giving money to the temple treasury, per se. But he did call them out on the disconnect between their preening religious behavior for show and the way they treated those (such as the widow) who most depended on them.

We are all called to be good stewards of what God gives us, which necessarily means maintaining an integrity of connection between what we say we believe and what we actually do. Obviously, there are many different ways to draw up a budget for individuals and groups, including churches, such as line-item, proportional, paying

yourself first, envelope budget, and zero-sum. Our financial stewardship – personal and corporate – has to take into account our financial obligations. But we also must be careful that our checkbooks and our calendars match what we say we believe.

In the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), you can read a set of six mission statements which are called “The Great Ends of the Church.” They “define the life and work of the Presbyterian Church (USA). For decades, these axioms have helped establish the course for mission and ministry, and present basic works to our denomination that are the heart of who the church is and what the church is called to do.”⁴ They are: The proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; The shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; The maintenance of divine worship; The preservation of the truth; The promotion of social righteousness; and The exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

If our church budget helps us meet these great ends of the Christian life and mission, then maybe, just maybe we will find ourselves and our church closer to the kingdom of God and better at practicing a religion that is pure and undefiled.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we give you our hands to do your work. We give you our feet to go your way. We give you our eyes to see as you see. We give you our tongues to speak your words. We give you our minds to think as you think. We give you our spirits so that you may pray in us. We give you ourselves so that you may grow in us; so that it is you, Lord Jesus, who lives and works and prays in us. Amen.

NOTES

¹The Associated Press, “Christian radio host sentenced to three life sentences for Ponzi scheme bilking millions from elderly listeners,” November 2, 2021 at www.nbcnews.com.

²John R. Donahue, “Mark,” in *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 1001.

³John F. Anderson, Jr., “Down to Earth: Offering Showing Value of Religion?” April 12, 1975, Dallas (TX) *Morning News*, p. 3D, Col. 1.

⁴ “The Great Ends of the Church,” Hidenwood Presbyterian Church at www.hiddenwood.org.