
Elections, Identity, and Poverty

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 27, Year B
Another Sunday After Election Day

Jesus 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 12:41–44

Elections. Identity. Poverty.

My habit is to prepare Sunday sermons way before the Sunday that I preach them. So it is, this week, that I started writing this sermon last Monday, before any of us knew the results of Tuesday's presidential election.

And I knew what I wanted to say before I even knew this year's particular election results. I did know that one candidate would prevail, and that one political party would prevail. I knew last Monday that I wanted to say two things today.

The first is this: As Christians, we live in a different world. As Christians, in a different world, we identify with something different from the categories that our world gives us. Oh yes, I acknowledge that we are male and female, republican and democrat, progressive and conservative, young and old, glad and mad. At one level, we are all those identities, to which the world chooses to categorize us.

But as Christians, we are, more deeply, something else. We come to church to identify with a different community from the one the world assigns us. I hope you know, by now, that this is what I have preached every Sunday here, no matter what election is forthcoming and no matter what election has just occurred. Look it up. Look up what I preached in the year 2020, on November 8. Look up what I preached in the year 2016, on November 13. Our identity is deeper than what national politics assigns us.

Some church pulpits are filled with the same news that we could get just as easily from one of our partisan news media sources. We could come to church just to hear our political identities confirmed and mirrored and amplified.

From this pulpit, however, I hope we hear every Sunday the characteristics of a different identity. We might hear of love one Sunday, justice another Sunday, compassion, tenderness, joy, peace, longsuffering. Saint Paul's fruits of the spirit. We might even hear of pain, honest pain, that God still touches. We hear about redemption and resurrection. Every Sunday, we hear from good preachers about Christian values. We believe in values here, not particular candidates.

So, today, I bring you another value of our Christian identity, the one that presents itself in the lectionary gospel for today. The Christian value that I present today is poverty.

"Truly I tell you, [said Jesus] 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 12:44)

The second thing I want to say today is about poverty. We give out of our poverty. Like the poor widow that Jesus saw.

Now, it is important to me, in this gospel story, that Jesus does not condemn the large donors to the treasury, that he also saw. Believe me, the church needs generous large donors. Many churches, and ours, too, appreciate those who give from their abundance. Jesus said elsewhere, "From those to whom much is given, much is required" (Luke 12:48). That is good. I enjoy people who give out of their abundance. The church really needs people like that.

But Jesus also noticed something else that day. He did not condemn the large givers; but what he remarked upon was the person who was giving out of her poverty.

He saw a poor widow, who had no family at all, much less a wealthy family; and she put in a few meager coins. He chose her to talk about, and to praise her, *"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."*

What was it about her gift that Jesus applauded? What does it mean to give out of one's poverty? Well, if poverty means being poor in something, Jesus is saying "Blessed are the people who give out of the places where they are poor."

People who give out of their poverty give from the places where they are weakest. Maybe they don't have much money; but they give it, and they give a lot of it, often more generously than the people who do have lots of money.

In my years as a priest, I have known both the poor and the rich. I have been friends with both. I have served churches where the top givers were NOT at all the wealthiest people in the congregation. They simply tithed, they gave ten percent of their income, before taxes, to their local congregation, and they enjoyed doing so. They really got something wonderful out of it.

You know, one of the most powerful offerings we ever take up, here at the Cathedral, is at the All Saints Homeless Requiem Eucharist, when we invite so many homeless people for dinner and for prayer. Many of you have been here for that holy day, over the years. And many of you have noted, that during the service, when our nave is full of homeless people, with almost nothing to their name, we actually take up an offering. We pass the plate.

One of the most amazing sounds this cathedral ever hears, every year, occurs during that offering of the All Saints Day Requiem Eucharist. It is the sound of coins, metal coins striking the metal offering plates. Poor people, who have hardly anything, give what they do have. They are poor, and yet they give. I don't do the math, but I imagine they give an incredible percentage of their annual income to God in the offering plate. They give an incredible percentage of their *assets*, their *entire wealth*, to God in the offering plate!

That offering is a special offering here. (By the way, the Cathedral does not put that offering into our own treasury. We immediately pass it on to one of the agencies who was here that night, who are serving the poor.)

When we think of poverty, we probably think of someone being poor in financial wealth. And the word does mean that. But these words of Jesus also deliver an incredible spiritual principle that goes beyond money. It is about money, for sure. When we give from our poverty of money, God does bless us.

But poverty, like wealth, can be about things other than money. Many of us are poor in spirit, poor in relationships, poor in happiness, poor in courage, poor in wisdom; we even feel poor in love.

What does it mean to give out of our poverty when our poverty is about something other than money? Well, the principle is the same. I believe Jesus means to give from any place in our lives that feels weak, or thin, or poor. I believe Jesus means to give from the place we feel the weakest, from the place where we feel the poorest. That's what giving from our poverty means.

Are you poor in relationships? Then, give from there. Invite someone to sit with you at church, in the park, go for a walk with someone. Are you feeling poor in courage? Give even your most meager attempt at bravery! Many military veterans, whom we remember tomorrow on Veterans Day, know what that is like -- to be brave when they were not feeling courageous at all. We salute them!

Are you feeling poor in love, as if no one loves you? Then, give from that place! Go give whatever small sliver

of love you do have to someone else! It is amazing what happens when people who don't think they are loved go out and try loving someone.

Are you feeling unhappy about yourself? Are you poor in happiness? Well, giving from that place means going out and finding someone else for whom you can be happy. Yes, try being happy for someone else! The odds are you will feel happier about yourself as well.

Give from whatever place you feel the weakest. Sometimes that requires some self-examination. Where am I the weakest? Where am I the poorest? That is the place from which God invites me to give.

Yes, our country has just gone through another election. I have lived through them, as a preacher, at least nine times now, preaching on the Sundays after national elections many times. And, you know what? Elections, whatever the outcome, often have the effect of showing us our poverty!

Every election has strong results, of course. But I think every election also shows us our poverty, where we are strong, yes, but also where we are weak and forlorn. Either: Our candidate lost, and we feel forlorn. Or: Our candidate won, and we are sad that others are not so glad. Over time, elections teach us that the State will not save us. A fair election will not save us. A popular leader will not save us! Nations themselves, as good as they are, do not save us.

It is God, and only God, who saves us. And God saves us when we offer ourselves, when we offer not just our strength, but when we offer our weakness, when we give out of our poverty.

Yes, most of you here at church each Sunday have heard what I say about the Sunday offertory plate and procession. But I say it again: Everyone has something to give! It may not be money, or wine, or bread, or music. It may be joy and laughter, but it may be sorrow or pain. And it may not be much at all. It may be poverty. Whatever it is, our offertory procession is an opportunity to give to God. Touch the plate with whatever weak gift you have and let God bless it.

Here at this church, we are in the business of miracles. The miracle is that the only things God has to work with are the gifts that start from us. They may be small, and they may be huge. But God changes all of them. The miracle is that God turns them from weakness to strength, over and over again.

The saints whom Jesus sees as the strong, the faithful, the blessed, are those who give from our poverty, from the places where we know we are weak.

AMEN.

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