

Jesus, Friend of...the Poor
Mark 12:41-44
April 7, 2019
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Back in college, I got invited to go to a baseball game with a friend of mine. After he issued the invitation, he said, "Oh, and Josh is going, too." Hmm. I didn't really care for Josh. He talked a little too loud and a little too often and a little too much about himself, and he rooted for the wrong team and didn't like BBQ or puns. So I told my friend I couldn't make it. He said, "Is it because Josh is going?" I admitted that might have something to do with it. He paused and said, "Look, Kory, I love you and all, but if you're going to be my friend, you have to be his friend, too." I ended up going to the game.

I wonder if Jesus would say the same thing to us today. We can easily close our eyes and sway as we sing, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," but I imagine Jesus would be quick to say to us that if we want to be his friend, we have to be friends with the people he was friends with. And I don't like that. I want to pick and choose the friends I want, the people like me, the people I want to be around. But Jesus gently reminds us that our goal as Christians is not to be better versions of ourselves; the goal is to be more like Jesus. And that means if we want to be his friend, we have to be friends with his friends.

During our Lenten sermon series, we're looking at some of the people Jesus was friends with and acknowledging that they are a lot different than us. They are the people on the edges of society, like the sick and the mentally ill. They are people that society discounts, like women and children. And today, we're looking at a group of Jesus' friends whom we would often don't even see: the poor.

How do we define this group? The most clear-cut way is with statistics, but the Bible gives us other ways, and we have to be careful about how we use those definitions. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We could make the argument that we are ALL poor in spirit, that we all fall short and are in need of God's grace, and that's true. But I like Luke's version of this passage better because it cuts to the chase. Luke says, "Blessed are the poor." Period. So, let's be careful not to so spiritualize this passage that we miss the point about God favoring the poor among us.

Some people bristle at that notion, that God favors the poor. Even when Jesus constantly calls the rich to account for how their wealth stands between them and God, even when Jesus exemplifies the poor around him like the widow in our story, some folks will downplay that, saying that by using Jesus to further an agenda toward serving the poor, we are politicizing him and his mission. When people or causes use the gospel as a catalyst to address issues of poverty in our communities, some critics say that's politics, not religion.

But as I read the gospels, there's a big overlap between the two. Jesus was not only addressing the poor and downtrodden individuals he met, he was also addressing the systems that made them poor and downtrodden in the first place. Notice what he says about the scribes in our reading, how he castigates them for their flashiness while they devour widows' homes. The religious and political leaders were building castles, while Jesus came to build a kingdom. Jesus was not shy about mixing his religion with the politics of the day in order to shine a light on the places where society was falling short in caring for the least of these. Jesus was political and one of his main areas of focus was how the church took care of the poor.

In case you're not quite buying this interpretation of Jesus, let's return to chapter 4 of Luke. Jesus has been born, dedicated at the temple, has grown up, was baptized by John, and spent time in the wilderness. Now, he's ready to get his show on the road. His very first stop in his ministry is the temple, where he stands up and reads from the prophet Isaiah. This is, in essence, Jesus' mission statement. This reading sets the tone for all that he has come to earth to accomplish. Did you hear how it starts? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." Right at the beginning, Jesus says that he is about bringing good news to the poor. So that begs the question: If we are followers of Jesus, if we are trying to be like him, are we bringing good news to the poor? Are WE good news to the poor?

Last summer, I participated in a poverty simulation sponsored by the Community Action Council of Lexington. We were divided into families and each given a role. I was a 60-year-old African-American woman who was partially paralyzed. I lived with my son and daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. For the simulation, each 10 minutes was a week. The kids went to school and the adults went to work while I stayed home and tried to care for myself. During the first week, one of our cars got stolen, so we had to figure out how to get transportation. The second week, my son got sick, so he couldn't work and he lost his income. The third week, when the rent was due, we didn't have enough money because we had spent it on medicine for my son. The fourth week, we were evicted. By the time we got to that point, I was sweating and my heart was racing, even though I knew I would leave that room and get into my reliable car to drive to my nice house and healthy family. Could you imagine how you would feel if that situation as real? Which would you choose, rent or medicine?

In Fayette County, 17.7% of people live below the poverty line and a shocking 24.4% of children live in poverty. That's one in five kids. For a single person, the poverty line is \$12,000. For a family of two, it's \$16,500. For a family of three, it's \$20,700, and for a family of four, that line is \$25,000. Imagine your family trying to live on that much money. Could you survive? What would have to go? What would you do when you had to decide between rent and medicine? How would you tell your children you didn't have enough money for them to go on the school field trip? If you're like me, it's easier not to think about those things because of the guilt it induces. I have a phone that unlocks when it recognizes my face and a watch that lets me read my text messages, and yet one in five children in my community live in poverty.

I'm not trying to make you feel guilty. I'm not saying you don't deserve what you have earned. I'm not encouraging you to go sell all you have and give it to the poor. But I am saying that we can't cuddle up to the parts of Jesus we like and ignore the parts that make us uncomfortable. I think one of the reasons Jesus emphasized the poor was that he knew if it were up to us, we'd just as soon forget about them. Rev. William Barber, a Disciples pastor who is an outspoken advocate for the poor and oppressed, said, "Every five years, we need to be reintroduced to Jesus." Why? Because it's easy to paint Jesus in our image rather than work to conform to his. And Jesus was a friend of the poor.

The woman in our story is a perfect example. The rich and haughty of society were making a spectacle of the money they put in the metal offering containers at the temple. Their weighty donations would make a big "thud!" in the bottom of the container when they threw it in, and the crowd probably "oohed" and "aahed" each time a heavy hitter got ready to give their offering. It was stewardship as spectator sport and the rich loved to make a show of it.

And then, a different kind of giver approaches. She's a widow, which means she probably was barely scratching out an existence. Her drabby clothes would have paled in comparison to the colorful flowing robes of the rich people. She only has two small coins to her

name, totaling less than a penny. She clasps her coins in her hand and then, maybe with a bit of hesitation, lets the drop into the container. Clink. Clink. No one hears it or pays attention. No one cares what she gives. No one bothers to see her. Except Jesus. He was watching and he cares, not about her offering, but about her.

We too easily fall into the trap of the crowds at the temple, using society's criteria to judge who is worthy and who is not. Bigger equals better, so a bigger offering means a better believer. But Jesus, as he so often does, turns those cultural criteria upside down, saying it was the woman's penny that was worth more than the rich man's suitcase of cash. That's an important corrective for Jesus to offer us, because we can easily believe that a person's worth is determined by measurable standards like clothes or money. Jesus reminds us that God doesn't love us any more because we have succeeded and others have failed.

Easier said than done, right? Especially when we are confronted by people holding signs at intersections asking for handouts, especially when we read news stories about how people take advantage of the system rather than earning their keep. We take those kinds of situations and extrapolate them out to generalizations, drawing conclusions that most poor people are lazy, are scamming the system, that they could really get out of their situation if they just tried harder. And we use that justification to not do anything, to stay insulated in our comfort, to not risk vulnerability and sacrifice to help the poor. If we don't pay attention to the poor, if we let them stay invisible, they become lost, forgotten about, reduced to stereotypes. And then we're not inconvenienced.

But they are more than that. They are people like you and me. I was visiting Central Christian Church a few weeks ago and learning about their amazing ministry to the poor around them. One person told a story about a homeless man she saw there almost every day. Sometimes he would get food or clothing, but other times he would just hang around. She asked him one day why he came by every day, even when he didn't need anything. He responded, "Because this is the only place I go where you all call me by my name."

"If you want to be my friend, you have to be his friend." We are blessed to attend an affluent church in a middle-class community, surrounded by nice houses with two-car garages. It's highly unlikely that we will ever experience the kind of poverty that exists just a few miles from here. That's all the more reason that we should be focused on addressing both the systems that produce poverty and the people affected by those systems. Pope Francis said, "Poverty is precisely at the heart of the Gospel. If we were to remove poverty from the Gospel, people would understand nothing about Jesus' message."

There are organizations like Lexington Rescue Mission and the Community Action Council and the Hope Center that need our hands, that need our voices, and that need our resources to address the problem of poverty around us. And there are people, real people, who need to know the church still cares about them. One in five children in Lexington lives below the poverty line. If that doesn't make us mad, we might be following the wrong Jesus. God loves us too much to let us get comfortable with our abundance. Are we good news to the poor?