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“This poor widow put in more than all the rest” (Luke 21:3).

Rev 14:1-3, 4b-5; Luke 21:1-4

Today’s Gospel story of the poor widow in the temple is a continuation of Jesus’ act of cleansing the temple to restore it as a place of prayer. If the money changers had turned it into a “den of thieves,” the big donors were turning it into a backdrop for their displays of public generosity when they sent their silver coins clattering into the brass treasury urns. Major philanthropists got a trumpet fanfare. It was all show and no worship.

The poor widow, the name itself a description of the poorest and most powerless people in Jerusalem, had put in two coins, small enough to make no noise, and had withdrawn into the crowd unnoticed by anyone except Jesus.

Her two farthings were as insignificant as she was, but Jesus saw her total surrender in this small gift. She was giving herself to God, unlike the wealthy donors who gave from their surplus to garner praise. The widow came to the temple to pray, while the rich came to preen and left as full of themselves as when they had entered.

This late in Luke’s Gospel, everything Jesus sees reinforces what he is about to do at Passover. His encounter with Zacchaeus, the sinner in the sycamore tree, had prepared him to mount the tree of the cross to die for sinners. The outpouring of trust by a poor widow was a preview of his own act of self-emptying love in obedience to his *Abba* and to fulfill the Scriptures.

Jesus was about to give truth to a phrase Flannery O'Connor would title her 1955 short story, "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead," which later became the first chapter in her 1960 novel "The Violent Bear It Away." Both titles summarize the Gospel's demand for passionate surrender to the will of God. The widow, like Jesus, was offering her poverty to God as her empty hands awaited the rush of grace that is God's own self-emptying love in return. Jesus was staking his life on the promise that those who lose everything for God's sake will find it again in eternity.

Prudent people protect their substance and tithe from their surplus, a strategy that offers some security and a feeling of self-reliance. Want is a form of suffering that haunts the unemployed and paycheck-to-paycheck poor. Necessity is a hard master we all hope to outrun. The poor widow in today's Gospel illustrates the cruelty of poverty but she also reminds us to make total surrender to God the foundation of our prayer.

Spiritual poverty is a grace that prepares us for the real poverty that death will impose. Now is the time to let go of anything that might keep us from the freedom only trust in God offers. It also inspires us to loosen our hold on what we have that others need, and this will lighten our load before final flight.

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