

When I was eight years old we moved, but I remember the house we moved from had a breakfast bar between the kitchen and dining room where we ate most meals. Because I was too young to understand that the height of the bar stools made them less stable than regular chairs, and because I was a squirmy kid, my parents were always telling me to sit still so my chair didn't tip. But one night I leaned too far, the chair flipped backwards, and I cracked my head on the stove behind me. I can picture my mother comforting me, but although I don't clearly remember this part, my other childhood memories would suggest that I was reminded that I had been warned, and that this was the consequence of not listening. And that's true; I most certainly had been told, often, to sit still, and I didn't, so I had nobody to blame but myself. Yet, in hind sight, the perfectly serviceable dining room table with its normal, sturdy chairs would have been a great place for a squirmy little kid to eat dinner.

If we think of contemporary Christianity as a spectrum, one end focuses more on systemic sin—racism, violence, injustice—without talking as much about individual morality—stealing the neighbor's internet or lying to get out of something we don't want to do—while at the other end of the continuum those priorities are flip-flopped. Oversimplified, those at one end are more concerned about the condition of the community while those closer toward the other end worry more about the condition of individual souls. That is, of course, a false dichotomy; our individual choices are all made in the context of the community, so the systems matter; and the systems are created by the sum total of our individual decisions, so personal moral behavior matters. It's both/and. But those different perspectives pull very different messages out of the same passages of scripture. So, one popular interpretation of today's gospel says that Jesus commended the poor widow for putting her last two pennies in the collection plate, so each of us, should give everything we have as a sign that we trust God to provide. But I'm not going to preach that sermon.

We are near the end of Mark's gospel, when Jesus brings his disciples to Jerusalem for his last Passover. Passover commemorates God freeing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and leading them to the Promised Land, where in obedience to God's law, they were to become an exemplary society that would draw other nations to God, attracted by their uniquely egalitarian way of life. In short order, Israel abandoned God's plan by demanding that God give them a king, because instead of serving as an example to other nations they wanted to go back to being just like other nations, like Egypt from which God had freed them; God gave them what they asked for, and, as predicted, Israel's society, under its corrupt and selfish monarchies, devolved into instability and injustice, making them an easy target for their enemies.

But as part of God's original plan, the Temple was to serve not just as a place of worship but as a kind of social security office in what was supposed to be Israel's new economic system. Each

tribe was given a parcel of land, except for the Levites, who were set apart as priests. The produce of the land the members of the other tribes brought as offerings to the Temple were not all to be used as whole burnt sacrifices, but some were lifted before the altar to God and then distributed to the Levitical priests to feed their families, since without land, they couldn't raise their own food. Along with the landless priests, those offerings were supposed to support other members of the community who were not able to provide for themselves: widows, orphans, and resident aliens. In practice, the Israelites neglected those others who were supposed to receive that help. The overarching message of all the prophetic books is an indictment of Israel's failure to care for the most vulnerable members of their society.

So when Jesus brings his disciples to the Temple, he has some critical words to say about the religious leaders he finds there: the scribes wear long robes, not clothes you'd wear to do work, and they seek attention and honor. They *appear* righteous by saying long prayers, but they *devour widows' houses* in order to support themselves. And as if to underscore his point, in walks a widow who puts *everything she had, all she had to live on* into the treasury. Compared to the rich people who put in large sums, if counted as a percentage, she gives much more. But the size of the offering is beside the point. The whole scene raises the question: How did the Temple, which was supposed care for the most vulnerable, become the place where religious leaders walked around in fancy robes paid for by the last two cents of a widow? The whole system was broken.

Jesus doesn't tell his disciples to be like the widow: he tells them to beware of the scribes. Nowhere in the Law did God command the poor to give the last of what they had. The Law in fact said the opposite—that in her poverty, the widow should receive from others' abundance. The scribes were the experts in God's Law; they should have known it was their job to help the widow; but instead, they chose to help themselves. Here, as throughout the gospels, Jesus condemns those who claim to be the most religious, but who happily benefit from a corrupt system that exploits the most vulnerable.

We can look at sin as those complex overarching systems of "isms" or as our personal thoughts, words, and deeds, but whether we're looking through a telescope or a microscope, we're called to look beyond just what we want for ourselves to what gives life to others. Luther described sin as turning inward in selfishness where in contrast, Jesus selflessly served others. We live in a world of systems that make it hard to be selfless, a world that warns us to put our interests first, that teaches us to blame and fear and use others to get what we want. So choosing to live generously isn't easy. But trusting God to accompany us as we follow Jesus in selfless service is how we as individuals, then as partners and teams and congregations and communities transform this world, fixing those broken systems that keep us from living fully into the kingdom of God. We have so much work to do. Thank God we have help.