

Three Bottom Lines

Today's gospel reading is about the bottom line. Actually not just about the bottom line we talk about in business, but the three bottom lines of heavenly business. You are familiar with today's Gospel story. Jesus is watching people come to the temple and put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. But then a poor widow comes, and put in two coins worth a penny. Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly, this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury. For they gave out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." (Mk 12:35-44)

If we are people who only see the bottom line, then it is very hard to understand what Jesus wants us to learn from this story. The amount the woman gave, equivalent to a penny, is totally insignificant. Either Jesus was naïve and idealistic for choosing her as a great example for the ages, or else we are missing something and need Jesus' help to see.

And indeed in today's Gospel reading, our Lord help us see, not one but three, bottom lines when it comes to living and giving a life to its fullest. The first bottom line is how much did you give. This bottom line is important because money is needed to do good in this world; but it is only the first. The second bottom line is not how much did you give, but how much could you give. And the third is with how much heart did you give. We can see these three bottom lines of Jesus as the three dimensions of a generous and complete life, sort of the length, the breadth, and height of a life. To live life abundantly, we can't live by one dimension, we must live in all three; and today's parable of the widow's mite encourages us to do so.

Starting with the first bottom line of profits, as I mentioned, this widow's penny was totally worthless. In fact, did you know that a penny today cost a lot more to make than it is even worth? This widow's penny, when you take into account the cost to make it, account for it and store it, may have been worse than worthless for the bottom line. But, once we consider the widow's gift in light of the second bottom line-not only what she did give, but what she could give-do we see the value of her gift increase exponentially. As Jesus said, this widow 'has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.' So though what she did give was a penny, almost nothing, what she could give was a penny, and that for her was everything. Everything the widow had, she gave to God and others, and in this way, any amount we give becomes greatly magnified by its proportion to our means.

But that's not all. It's not just the length of our gifts, the amount, or the breadth of our gifts, the proportion, which matter. There is also the depths of our gifts, the third bottom line which is the heart behind your and my gifts. When accounting for this, the widow's mite comes fully to life. Think about it. This woman has every reason to be cynical in her heart when it comes to giving. In the temple, she is in line to make her penny donation with wealthy people giving many dollars. Any of us might have said, what use is my penny, which I desperately need, when people are throwing in one-hundred times this? Moreover, she is depositing her penny in the treasury of Solomon's great temple. This place was like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, it was the seat of religious and political power, it was a lavish building, with everything wrought in gold. These people are sitting on millions, what use is my penny? And wait a minute, why am I giving money to them, shouldn't these people be giving money to me?

This widow had every reason to be cynical, entitled and miserly with what she had, yet she was hopeful, generous, and trusting instead. That's because this widow understood what Jesus understood, and what he wants us to understand today; the third bottom line, the depth and heart of giving. Yes, the amount we give is important. Yes, the proportion of how much we could give, magnifies our gifts. But the greatest reason we give has nothing to do with the gift and everything to do with the giver. At heart, our giving acknowledges a great truth about who we are; that our God is the greatest giver, and like him we are called to be. Our giving acknowledges that we aren't people who have nothing to give, who have received nothing from life and who only care for our own needs. To the contrary, we have much to give of our time, talent and treasure. We have received abundant gifts from God in all these areas. And we care for much bigger things than just ourselves. Living and giving in this way-with three bottom lines, in three dimensions-makes for an abundant life. For in doing so, we partake of the abundant generosity and infinite grace of our Lord; now and always, amen.