**On the Way to Economic Justice**

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*Scripture:* Mark 12:13-17 (The question about taxes) and 38-44 (The widow's two coins)

*Hymns:* HWB 383, 384, StJ 60

It was several years ago that I stumbled on this series by photographer Peter Menzel.[[1]](#footnote-1) He travelled around the world with his camera photographing families with one week’s worth of their groceries. The results, published in his book, *Hungry Planet*, give us literal snapshots of what good food looks like in different cultures as well as what is available in different places, and what families are able to afford. It doesn’t take long to realize that in the global scheme of things, many of us are quite privileged in what we’re able to buy and prepare and eat. Most of us are not living hand-to-mouth – or relying on food aid at refugee camps. Instead, most of us strive to put our money where our mouths are – to share what we have, to practice gratitude and generosity.

As someone who is still adjusting to life after being a graduate student for many years, I find myself thinking a lot about giving. After many years of financial precarity, living from scholarship to scholarship, it feels somewhat overwhelming to suddenly be in a position to give financially to causes I feel led to support. But I am curious about how one makes those decisions well, especially in the internet age, when one could literally donate online to anything, anywhere in the world. How do we decide how to best allocate our resources? And, importantly, how do we model and teach generosity and giving to the next generation?

Back in September, the *Canadian Mennonite* magazine had a whole issue on giving, including a look at the different giving habits of different generations. Nicolien Klassen-Wiebe wrote about how those over 70 years old tend to be in the season of life where they can give in an organized, consistent way, through channels that offer official tax receipts, for instance. Younger people, however, are facing a different financial landscape, with higher student loan debt, fewer paths to steady employment, and therefore less access to buying homes or vehicles than previous generations. And yet Millennials (people my age and younger) care deeply about inequality and social justice, and live generously – just in less measurable ways. They may give of their time, or to causes online, without concern for tax receipts. Or they may be really thoughtful about their consumer choices, such as buying fair trade or opting out of consumerism or living simply and sustainably[[2]](#footnote-2) (we are the generation of Tiny Houses and attempts to go “Zero Waste,” after all). And we’ve seen some of these generational differences in our church community. There is no one-size-fits all giving strategy.

But what remains important is for us to share our experiences with giving. It’s somewhat counter-cultural for us to talk openly about money – it makes us uncomfortable. Yet in that same issue of the *Canadian Mennonite*, Lori Guenther Reesor makes the case that churches need to talk about money – and not just when we’re facing a budget shortfall. In her words, “the spiritual discipline of giving is a discipleship question.” Now I don’t think this means we don’t have to be sensitive in how we speak about money – we don’t want it to devolve into guilt-trips and shame for people at any place on the financial spectrum. But, as Guenther Reesor says, this is a key way to encourage one another to give as we are able. “Listening to generous people share how they learned to give is a joy I recommend to everyone. Generosity can be contagious.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

I think Jesus would agree. Our two Scripture passages for today from Mark 12 are both examples of Jesus talking about money, which was actually a recurring theme in his teaching and preaching. For him, it’s also a discipleship question and a spiritual practice. In the first story, we have the famous question about taxes that comes from some Pharisees (teachers of the law) and Herodians (supporters of the Jewish ruler, Herod, well-known collaborator with Rome) who were sent to trap Jesus. It’s meant to be an impossible question, setting Jesus up for a lose-lose situation. And of course, it’s a politically loaded question, since it cuts to the core of whether or not Jesus is loyal to the Roman Empire, the occupiers of the Jewish people. If he answers that his followers don’t have to pay taxes, they’ll accuse him of spreading disloyalty to Rome. But if he advises his followers to obediently pay their taxes, he could be seen as a collaborator with the Roman Empire, which many Jewish people would have seen as a betrayal, and which contradicted a lot of his other teachings.

But Jesus sees through this attempt to “put him to the test” right away, and finds a clever way around it. He asks that a Roman coin be brought to him (notice that he doesn’t have any money on him – how interesting!). And he asks whose head is on the coin. When they answer that it’s the emperor’s, he says, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17) – an answer that astounds those who are listening.

Now it’s important to remember that Jesus’ response isn’t just a clever way of dodging this tricky question put to him by other Jewish leaders. It’s interesting that the question posed to Jesus is an either-or question, as if this is a black-and-white issue. The question is posed as if this is a legal question – “Is it lawful for us to pay taxes?” But Jesus’ answer comes more from the Wisdom tradition. He doesn’t tell people what to do, but rather invites them to think about what it is they value – and to do that discernment and make those choices wisely for themselves. It reminded me of a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, which we have been working through in Women’s Bible Study. There, in Matthew 6, Jesus talks about it in terms of treasure, saying, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). To me, this sounds an awful lot like “put your money where your mouth is” or, “practice what you preach.”

The other thing that we need to remember is that taxes to the Roman Empire meant something very different than the taxes we contribute to in Canada today. You can bet they weren’t paying into universal healthcare, senior pensions, or public education. (I think Jesus’ healings were maybe the closest thing to “universal healthcare” back then!) No, the Roman Empire was concerned with steep taxes to finance its massive army to expand its borders and keep its occupied people under ruthless control. And to build roads and infrastructure for its massive army. Imagine having to pay people to occupy your land and threaten your family. That’s what kind of “a corrupt, oppressive system” we’re talking about here.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of course, a portion of our tax dollars also finance war – about 9% – and there are those who choose to resist this by withholding a portion of their tax dollars through an organization called Conscience Canada.[[5]](#footnote-5) But the vast majority of our taxes fund public programs and services that we all rely on to a greater or lesser extent. At their best, taxes can function to level the playing field in society, to create a more equitable society, which is good for all of us. In other words, taxes can contribute to economic justice, and thus fulfill a value that we hold as followers of Jesus. So you see, it’s more complicated than the yes-or-no question, “Should we pay taxes?” Instead, it becomes, how do we work toward economic justice, which is part of the shalom or peace that Jesus taught and lived?

Our second Scripture narrative continues the conversation about taxes and treasure later in Mark 12. It’s actually also about taxes – the Temple taxes, in this case. And this is sometimes lost on us, cause we’re not familiar with how the Temple worked at the time. When Jesus sees the widow come and give her two small coins, he calls his disciples and says, “this poor widow has put in more than all of 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 that she had to live on” (v. 43-44).

Now we are used to reading this as a heartwarming story of giving. Bible scholar Ched Myers says, we’re used to reading this as a “quaint vignette about the superior piety of the poor.” But that’s not what’s going on here. Jesus’ tone is not approval, here. Instead, he’s calling out the corruption of the Temple leaders and the taxes they demanded even of a widow, a short-hand term for poverty in biblical times. One of the main responsibilities of “Torah Judaism” was to care for the orphans and the widows – and yet, here is the Temple leadership itself, demanding that this widow give her last two coins – what she needed to live on – to the Temple treasury. Rather than contributing to the redistribution of wealth and caring for those living in poverty, the corrupt Temple leaders were gouging them. In Myers’ words, “in the name of piety, these socially vulnerable classes are being exploited” while the leaders prospered.[[6]](#footnote-6) Temple taxes at that time could add up to up to 23% of one’s income – and then there were Roman taxes on top of that![[7]](#footnote-7) Jesus is here denouncing a broken and exploitative system, a corrupt Temple leadership “that has robbed this woman of her very means of livelihood” – a Temple system that is no better than the Roman Empire in taking from the poor. This is what Jesus means in accusing the Temple leaders of “devouring widows’ houses” in verse 40. And right after this story, Jesus storms out of the Temple, “[a]s if in disgust,” and goes on to foretell its destruction in the first few verses of chapter 13. And Jesus never sets foot in the Temple again, according to Mark’s gospel.[[8]](#footnote-8) So in the end, this story has more in common with Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple in Mark 11, overturning the tables of the money changers and all that, than we might assume.

So what about us? What are some of the ways we can work for economic justice in our time and place? We know we are part of economic systems that do not lead to justice. We know that in our world, there is a gap between the rich and the poor. And as people of faith, our giving is a spiritual practice that is part of our discipleship in Jesus’ Way of Shalom – justice and peace.

One way that we work toward economic justice is through our support of the fair trade movement, which emphasizes living wages, safe working conditions, and fair pay. Some of us are still reeling from the news that Ten Thousand Villages, our beloved fair trade organization, will be closing most of its Canadian stores, including our Saskatoon store, after 74 years. Luckily, there are other ways of supporting fair trade – it’s become much more integrated into mainstream stores than it used to be. And you likely know that our church coffee is fair trade, which is a great way of supporting those values and promoting economic justice.

I know many in this congregation also support MEDA, or Mennonite Economic Development Associates, which provides micro-loans and business and sustainability advice to help people help themselves out of poverty. They have a special focus on gender equity as well, helping women have access to the business world in places where there are barriers – like Intisar, “a new food entrepreneur selling pickles in Balqa governorate in Jordan, northwest of the capital Amman.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

We also work together as a church to sponsor refugees, to help give people a chance to make a new life after traumatic experiences of violence and war. You may have heard the story of Tareq Hadhad and his father Assam Hadhad, who came to Canada as refugees from Syria, landing in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. They had owned a chocolate factory in Damascus with 30 employees, but lost everything in the war. Now, their Canadian chocolate business, which they have named Peace by Chocolate, is experiencing great success.[[10]](#footnote-10)

But despite these wonderful examples of economic justice, let’s not forget that injustices remain. I learned recently that Saskatchewan has a child poverty rate of over 26%, one of the highest in Canada,[[11]](#footnote-11) as well as the lowest minimum wage in the country.[[12]](#footnote-12) We have more and more families that are among the “working poor” – they work full time, but it’s not enough to cover the rising costs of rent and food, and they must rely on Food Banks and other programs like Friendship Inn to feed their kids and make ends meet. What are ways that we can support economic justice for these kids here in our city, whether through our own giving or through advocating for a fairer economy for all?

I want to close with words from Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann that speak to our role as people of faith. He says, “The role of the church is to change the conversation away from greed, fear, and violence. And if you take the opposite of greed, fear, and violence, it’s generosity, trust, and peacemaking. That’s the only conversation worth having. And the church has the text that can fund that conversation.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

So in this time of Lent, as we continue to walk with Jesus in the Way of justice and peace, may this conversation about “generosity, trust, and peacemaking” encourage and empower us. AMEN

1. <https://fstoppers.com/food/what-week-groceries-looks-around-world-3251> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/money-and-menno-millennials> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://canadianmennonite.org/stories/why-your-church-needs-talk-about-money> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Farris, “A Tale of Two Taxations,” in *Jesus and His Parables: Interpreting the Parables of Jesus Today*, ed. George Schillington (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.consciencecanada.ca/?page_id=128> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 320-321. Myers says this was maybe a reference to the practice of scribes acting as trustees for the estates of widows, since women were not permitted to do so alone, a system prone to “embezzlement and abuse.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Farris, 24-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Myers, 322. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.meda.org/news/success-stories/347-the-recipe-for-success-collaboration> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/syrian-chocolatier-assam-hadhad-opens-chocolate-factory-1.3716018> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/saskatchewan/1-in-4-children-in-sask-in-poverty-study> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/group-rallies-lowest-minimum-wage-1.5080159> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Walter Brueggemann, *The Work of the People*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=KfznjThn48Y> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)