

BEWARE OF ECONOMIC PIETY
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Mark 12:38-44

She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

Gambling is legal in this county (Jefferson). At the Charles Town Races and Slots you can gamble at machines and on horses and depending on the outcome of the forthcoming referendum (Dec. 5), table games may be another option. I am not about to endorse gambling or advocate its prohibition in our county. After all, legal prohibition of alcohol failed miserably last century in this country.

I believe alcohol and casinos should be available in a free society. We sure don't want the Christian Taliban running our local, state or federal government.

I've been told that many people enjoy gambling at the Charles Town Races and Slots. Some patrons lose a lot of money but still have plenty left over. To them it's a harmless game, a form of recreation. Others, however, like the widow in today's gospel lesson drop in their last cent hoping against hope for financial salvation.

As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They [however] devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

*[While in Jerusalem] Jesus sat down opposite the treasury [collection receptacles], and watched the crowd putting money in. Many rich people put in large sums. Then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples over and said to them, "Listen up. Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all 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 she had to live on." **Mark 12:38-44***

Yes, I believe alcohol and casinos should be available in a free society. But I also believe people should be educated about the consequences of certain behavior and warned against seductive lies perpetrated by advocates of drinking and gambling. This sermon is such a warning.

Alcohol has ruined many lives and households despite the glamour and humor portrayed in television commercials. Gambling, too, has ruined lives, households and local economies despite the cheery scenarios forecast by the gaming industry. Drinkers and gamblers beware. Citizens beware.

All historic faith and ethical traditions agree. Sobriety leads to health and success. Drunkenness does not. Profits from hard and honest work benefit persons and societies. Profits won from gambling, lotteries or Ponzi schemes more often than not destroy people and societies.

Still, I believe alcohol and casinos should be available in a free society. After all, choice is a good thing. Some people, in fact, believe that freedom of choice is the highest possible good. I don't. According to our faith tradition that kind of freedom is a seductive lie. The highest good is not choice per se but rather the ability—the strength, courage and wisdom—to choose what is right, holy and wholesome. Such choices come from hearts, minds and bodies cultivated by virtuous habits not from mere license to do whatever one pleases.

Beware: some economic philosophies overrate human freedom and human goodness. We are not all free to the same degree. Not even close.

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched.

Jesus watched people make their donations to the Temple. Jesus was following the money. He saw rich people put in large sums of money with great fanfare. And then he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.

By the way, the "Temple" in this story is not the equivalent of this or any other "church." The Temple was the institutional hub of the Jewish nation. Giving to the Temple was as much a patriotic act as it was an act of spirituality. That widow, we might say, gave her last cent to the nation, the way some parents give their children to the nation because their children, unlike more privileged children, can't find any other job. Their choices are severely restricted.

Some give nearly all they have to the nation; others get to keep their wealth and their children close by. We are not all free to the same degree.

Jesus said, beware of the scribes.

That was then. This now. Today we might say: *beware of the Republicans*—but then that is *so last year!* Today we must say: *Beware of the Democrats!*

Today's gospel lesson urges us to beware of deceit, dishonesty and injustice hiding behind piety. At first reading it appears that Jesus commends the widow's extreme act of devotion to God. But I suspect something else is going on, especially in the light of his pointed criticism of the Temple, its ruling elite and its sacrificial cult. Jesus frequently denounced the Temple and its practices even though the Temple was as much a part of Jewish identity as the crucifixion is a part of Christian identity and as unfettered capitalism is part of our national identity.

Jesus spoke out even though it sounded unpatriotic. He decried the Temple practices and lifted up the prophetic voice from his tradition. *What does the Lord require?* Not bloody sacrifices. *God requires justice, kindness and humility.*

With biting sarcasm Jesus condemned a rigged economic system inscribed in law and draped in piety. Read his comment with anger in your voice and you're closer to the truth.

All of the rich have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, ALL SHE HAD TO LIVE ON for cryin' out loud.

In that society "widows and orphans" were the icons of economic vulnerability. This singular "widow" represents people, counties, states and nations victimized by predators who, for example, promise jobs and prosperity then devastate beautiful mountains in one state and run away with the profits to their own state.

Not everything that's legal is right.

Members of the scribal class were *legally* appointed by Temple officials to manage the financial affairs of widows. Many took advantage. There were exceptions but not enough to erase the reputation of the scribe for fraud and exploitation. *Beware of the scribes.*

Now this may not sound like the "Jesus" some of us know and love. But, as it turns out, there's more to Jesus and the Christian tradition than "making nice" with everybody. After all, there's more to love than condoning all behavior. Pieties of all sorts are used to disguise injustice, greed, dishonesty and cruelty. All criminals don't wear masks or carry

guns. Some wear suits, have seats on corporate boards and in Congress. Some salute the flag and the Ten Commandments five times a day!

Beware, says Jesus. Beware of people and institutions that love civic honors but mistreat the poor—not by *overt* cruelty but by *covert* policies that protect power and privilege while pressing others deeper and deeper into debt and desperation.

Beware, beware, beware. Be vigilant. Follow the money. Notice who gains and who loses. Pay attention to the plight of the poor. Be aware of those who suffer under the pious rhetoric of freedom, compassion, democracy, capitalism or big government's benevolent hand.

Beware. Notice who is marching off to war and who isn't. Notice who is giving their last drop of blood to the nation under slogans that disguise aggression and greed!

Beware. Beware of those who claim we can wildly borrow our way into prosperity, mount tons of national debt, pretend there's a free lunch, and flippantly ignore the consequences upon future generations. That is not justice. That is not kindness. That is no way to care for the poor.

Beware. Beware of those who praise freedom and free markets without being truthful about the human condition, which is to say quite simply: some people are born into privilege and privileged positions. Most are not. Those are basic facts of life on this planet. The Great Christian tradition—from Moses to the prophet Amos to Jesus to the Apostle James to St. Francis to William Wilberforce to Mother Theresa to Martin Luther King—confronts and exposes the injustice of legal systems rigged against the poor under the guise of piety.

The church, as the Body of Christ, has an obligation to heed the teachings of Jesus by keeping an eye on society's treatment of the poor. But we mustn't be stupid, mushy headed and romantic.

We mustn't think financial aid alone will solve the problems of poverty. After all, as Jesus said, we can't live on bread alone. We need art, poetry, music, hope and freedom in order to thrive. We can't live on bread alone. But, then, no one lives very long without bread. So we must foster conditions that create ethical wealth and jobs for more and more people.

So how does the church care for the "widow and orphan?" How do we care for the vulnerable? Well, how does Jesus, the Great Shepherd, care for his sheep? Sometimes gently—with anointing oil, a loaf of bread and a piece of fish. Sometimes by vigorously defending his sheep from predators. And sometimes by leading them to green pastures where they can flourish in freedom on their own.

We can live in the way and in the spirit of Jesus by doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with each other on this earth.