

“What About People in Poverty?”

Luke 6:20-26; Mark 12:41-44

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Like so many others of you here, I was saddened to learn this week about the death of Dolly Parton. Unlike so many of you here, however, I was not very familiar with Dolly Parton’s story, her music, and her faith until this past week.

Growing up in Michigan in the 1970s & 80s, I knew about Dolly Parton, but I wasn’t much of a country music fan, didn’t pay much attention to her songs or her movies.

And...I realize this says EVERYTHING about me and my own blind spots...I don’t ever remember hearing her song, “Coat of Many Colors,” until she died this week.

Is that possible?

That song came out a month before I was born...it’s as old as I am.

Is it truly possible I had never heard it before?

Well, we all have our blind spots, right?

As I suspect everyone except your preacher knew before this past week, that song had its origins in the home in which Parton grew up in Tennessee, and how her family had very little money, so her mother once made her a coat that was stitched together from colorful rags, and Dolly proudly wore the coat to school, only to be teased mercilessly by her classmates.

It’s a song about a mother’s love for her daughter, of course, as well as that daughter’s love for her mother.

But it’s also a song about acceptance and dignity,
about shame and worth...

and the role that poverty often plays in all that.

Do you remember how the last part of the song goes?
About her classmates who were teasing her, Parton sings:

**And I tried to make them see
That one is only poor
Only if they choose to be
Now I know we had no money
But I was rich as I could be
In my coat of many colors
My momma made for me**

We'll get back to that song in just a little bit.

As I mentioned a moment ago, our question for today's sermon is
"What About People in Poverty?"

Have you ever noticed how RELENTLESS Jesus was with this
question?

He asked it in so many different ways, at so many different times.

Returning to his home synagogue in Nazareth, Luke 4:18:
"...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."

When John the Baptist had doubts about Jesus, in Matthew chapter
11: "Go and tell John...the poor have good news brought to them."

To the rich young man in Mark 10:21—
"...go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor..."

Luke 14:13

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind...”

Luke 16:19

The parable of the rich man, and “a poor man named Lazarus...”

Matthew 25:

“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink...I was naked and you gave me clothing...”

As the theologian David Bentley Hart puts it:

“Jesus...had this concern for the most abject, the most indigent people in the world. There was a category of the deserving poor in the ancient world. But the *ptochoi*, the most wretched...were regarded as being too debased...to provide them with more than some alms.”

“What made the ministry of Jesus so strange,” Hart goes on to say, “...was that he made them the actual center of his concern, and even declared that the Kingdom of Heaven was theirs.”¹

It’s what you heard in our first text for today.

“Blessed are you who are poor—
(who are *ptochoi*—)
for yours is the kingdom of God.”

All that is one reason why I raise the question.

But truth be told, in preparing for this sermon, I had a hard time deciding whether I was asking the right question.

¹ David Bentley Hart, interview with Peter Wehner, “The Reason I’m Not an Atheist Is That I Think the Philosophical Arguments Against It Are Unanswerable,” *The New York Times*, April 12, 2026.

The first version of today's topic started out as a different question:
"Does God Side with the Poor?"

But that question felt too easy, because according to scripture the answer is unequivocally yes.

God hears the cries of the poor, as we heard today in Psalm 82.
God works for justice for the poor, God show's mercy to the poor.
God stands with the poor, and God wants us to stand there too.

So, I changed it to a harder question:
"What About People in Poverty?"

But that one almost feels TOO BIG.
Too broad.
Too overwhelming of a question.

Just take the statistics.

In 2024, in the United States, 10.6% of our country's population lived below the federal poverty line, which, for a family of four, was an annual income of \$31,812.

That's 35.9 million people.
10.4 million of those, in 2024, were children under the age of 18.²

Or never mind the numbers.
Just listen to one person's story.

In his book, "Poverty, by America," Matthew Desmond tells about Julio.

² [Poverty in the United States: 2024](#)

In 2014, Julio was working eighty hours a week at two full-time jobs. He began his day with the graveyard shift at a twenty-four hour McDonald's...[working] from 10pm to 6am.

After his shift ended, he had two hours to rest and shower. Then he'd clock in at Aerotek, going anywhere the temp service sent him between 8am and 4pm. When that shift ended, he slept as much as he could. Then it was back to McDonald's.

He did all this to afford the single unfurnished room he shared with his mother and two siblings in California. He did it seven days a week.

Once, his younger brother, Alexander, who was eight at the time, told Julio that he was saving money.

"What for?" asked Julio.

"I want to buy one hour of your time," Alexander told his older brother.

"How much for one hour to play with me?"³

Please, do not misunderstand.

I do not raise the question, "What About People in Poverty?" because our church has a tendency to IGNORE the question.

Quite the contrary.

Westminster has a faithful history of addressing this question.

³ Matthew Desmond, "Poverty, By America," New York: Crown, a division of Penguin Random House, 2023.

From yesterday's Day of Service, to Meals on Wheels in Greenville starting in Westminster's very own kitchen in the 1960s, to our current support for so many outreach partners:

United Ministries, Soteria, Thornwell,
Pleasant Valley, Mill Village Ministries, Project Host...

Make no mistake, the many ways that Westminster responds with commitment and generosity to our most vulnerable neighbors is one of the primary reasons I felt called to be a part of this congregation, and I trust the same is true for you.

At the same time, what Dorothy Day wrote long ago remains true:

"We need always to be thinking and [talking]...about poverty because people insulated by their own comfort lose sight of it."⁴

So....because today's question feels so big,
I'm going to break it down into four smaller questions.

Smaller Question #1:

When it comes to poverty, where is your blind spot?

I had a blind spot with Dolly Parton.
Not a big deal...

But when it comes to our topic today, people who struggle with poverty, my guess is that we all have a blind spot or two. I think Jesus thinks those blind spots are a big deal.

⁴ Robert Ellsberg, ed., "Dorothy Day: Selected Writings," New York: Orbis Books, 1998.

For example, when the Pulitzer-Prize winning child psychiatrist, Robert Coles, died this past summer, I was reminded of his recollection of what it was like to meet Dorothy Day.

Day, you will recall, founded the Catholic Worker movement, back in the first half of the 20th century. She is currently being considered for canonization in the Roman Catholic Church.

Day dedicated her life to helping the poor.
Befriending the poor.

She once wrote: “The mystery of the poor is this: That they are Jesus, and what you do for them you do for Him.”

So...when Coles entered a Catholic Worker soup kitchen for the first time, and he saw Dorothy Day, he was eager and excited to meet her...but at that moment, she happened to be having a conversation with a woman who had clearly been drinking.

The woman kept ranting and talking nonsense...and Day would quietly listen. Then Day would ask a question, and the woman would start in again with her rant and her nonsense...and Day would quietly listen.

Over and over this happened, and Coles became impatient.
Finally, Day asked the woman if she would mind an interruption.

And Dorothy Day walked over to Robert Coles,
and motioning toward the woman, she asked Robert Coles:
“Are you waiting to talk to one of us?”

Coles writes:

*“One of us: with those three words she had cut through layers of self-importance, a lifetime of bourgeois privilege, and scraped the hard bone of pride.”*⁵

You see, if we’re going to talk about poverty, and what it means to love our neighbors who live in poverty, we must begin with HUMILITY.

Because it’s not just our unknown neighbors, right?

Perhaps there’s a member of your family or extended family who struggles with poverty—there are people in this room with family like that.

Or perhaps you have a grown child who has trouble managing their money, and if it weren’t for your help, that child of yours would end up in poverty...

Or maybe you’re asking what it means to love a friend whom you suspect is barely making ends meet...or maybe, just maybe some of you have had a period in your life where you couldn’t make ends meet...

I don’t know what the tender places in your life look like when it comes to money, but I do know if we’re going to talk about this question, we must begin with humility.

As the Jesuit Priest Gregory Boyle puts it:

*“The wrong idea has taken root in the world. And the idea is this: there just might be some lives out there that matter less than other lives.”*⁶

⁵ Robert Coles, *“Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion,”* New York: Da Capo Press, 1987.

⁶ Gregory Boyle, *“Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion,”* New York: Free Press, 2010.

All of which leads me to Question #2:

When it comes to people in poverty, where is your hope?

It's a question that arises from our second text for today.

You remember the story.

Jesus sees all sorts of people contributing to the Temple's treasury.

"Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny."

And Jesus tells his disciples:

"...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."

The Greek word here, the one that's translated "all she had to live on," is *bios*. It's where we get the word for biology. In other words, she didn't just give her money away.

She gave herself away.⁷

Her life.

Her love.

All of it.

She didn't hold anything back.

It's one of the most HOPEFUL stories in all the Gospels.

That poor widow believed that in God's hands,

even her gift, her bios—

would make a difference!

⁷ I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Tom Are, "A Mature Patriotism," preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL, July 7, 2024 for this exegesis of the text.

When our WPCYG teenagers went on their Witness & Service trip to Florida back in the summer 2024, they helped repair a home that had been damaged by a hurricane.

The family that lived in the home had a daughter.
Her room had been in disrepair since the storm.
It meant for over a year, she could not sleep in her own room.
And the family did not have the money to fix it.

So, our Westminster teenagers, along with a handful of our adult youth leaders, went to Florida and helped repair her room.

I'm told that when the room was done, the father of the family wasn't just grateful.

He was in tears.

Can I put it like this?

During that week they were away, our WPCYG group gave their *bios*...their life, their love, their two coins...to that family.

And in God's hands, it made ALL the difference.

All of which brings me to...

Question #3:

Was Dolly Parton right?

When she wrote:

**...one is only poor
Only if they choose to be
Now I know we had no money**

**But I was rich as I could be
In my coat of many colors
My momma made for me**

On the one hand, of course she was not right.
And Dolly Parton knew it as well as anyone.

She knew the hardship of poverty, she knew that struggling with poverty wasn't just a poor choice.

And when she became wealthy,
she did what Jesus told all his followers to do.

She gave and gave and gave so much of her wealth away.

But on the other hand, was she right?
Of course she was right.

Before she ever made any money, she was rich as she could be—
because someone, I'm assuming it was her parents, but someone taught
her about the INCLUSIVE nature of the love of God.

I suspect it's why, for so many, there was such an outpouring of
grief this week.

Because we all know, deep down in our souls,
that INCLUSIVE is who God created all of us to be:

Inclusive with our money.
Inclusive with our time.
Inclusive with our church.
Inclusive with our kindness.
Inclusive with our grace.

So let me leave with question number 4:

It's an easy question.

Simple question.

Is it a simple question?

How can you include someone this week—

with your wealth,

with your welcome,

with your love,

with your *bios*...

whom you have never included before?

Amen.