

The Power of a Penny
Mark 12:38-44

It's time to do the grocery shopping. The shopping cart is full — cereal, milk, soda, protein bars, coffee, green vegetables, chicken, hamburger, and more. Now you're at the checkout counter and the total is \$319.47. The checkout person asks you a question: "Would you like to round up your total to help support the Community Center's After School program?"

Well, hold on. First, you wonder, "By 'round up' does she mean round up to \$319.50, to \$320, or to \$400?" Then you learn that she's asking if you want to add 53 cents to your total for a worthy cause. Only a real Scrooge would say no. So you say yes.

One organization that uses this fundraising approach is Goodwill Industries with its "Change for Change" program. In Fort Worth, Texas, shoppers raised more than \$295,000 across 25 retail locations in 2020. The program advertises, "You give change, and we will promote change," like job training for people with barriers to employment.

Goodwill and other businesses understand the power of a penny.

So does Elaina Redmond. In fact, she wrote a book by that title. It's a primer about the penny that not only provides penny principles, but links it to the U.S. president whose likeness is on the penny, Abraham Lincoln. The audience for her book is children, so the kids get fun lessons on history, culture, and economics.

Why all this talk about pennies?

When taking a spiritual inventory, it's a good exercise to think about the penny philosophy by which we live. Everyone in our congregation ought to be challenged to review how, specifically, they manage their money and the principles that guide them. In support of this challenge, here are a few "Penny Principles" we might keep in mind:

1. **The penny belongs to God.**
2. **The penny alone is powerless.** It's a piece of copper and zinc. It weighs a mere two and a half grams. It can be found on sidewalks and streets, in piggy banks, jars, pockets, kitchen drawers, parking lots, and around soda machines. But here's the thing: Unless you pick it up, it can't do anything. A penny has no power without a person to put it to work. Make plans for your penny. Put it to work. Let your money serve you. You set the agenda. You come up with the vision. If you don't, a penny is just a piece of loose change.
3. **Do not pander for the penny.** No need to lust after more money. It could be more trouble than it's worth. It's like the late Notorious B.I.G. raps in "Mo Money Mo Problems": I don't know what they want from me // It's like the more money we come across // The more problems we see.

4. **Do not try to please the penny.** Don't worship the penny; worship God. Remember the words of Jesus, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12:15). To this, the writer of Hebrews adds: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'"? (Hebrews 13:5-6).
5. **Do not pinch the penny.** Do not be parsimonious with the penny. Rather, be generous. Give it away to strangers. Give it to charity. Give it to the church. Keep what you need and give away the rest.
6. **Do not fear penury.** Giving away your penny will not thrust you into poverty. After all, it's not about having the most pennies when we die.

But think about also the power that the humble penny has!

It has the power to inspire. When Jesus watched the widow fumbling about in her change purse for the last coins she had, he was curious. He called his students over to watch. And they did — from a distance. Her two coins amounted to less than a penny. He and the disciples watched her drop them in the collection box. And knowing her situation, they were all amazed. Her bank balance just went from less than a penny to zero.

Jesus was highly impressed, especially since he had watched the Pharisees put money into the treasury and lots of it. But these were the people who had oppressed the poor widows in the first place. It was ill-gotten gain.

This woman worshiped God with the coins that she had — all the coins she had. Jesus was inspired, and he said, "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" (vv. 43-44). That widow's penny had the power to inspire.

The penny has the power to change. Inspiration often leads to change. Dr. Dilhani Uswatte is the principal of Rocky Ridge Elementary School in Hoover, Alabama. According to Forbes article, she is a "master of leadership."

Dr. Dil (as she likes to be called) has a motto: "Take the time to inspire and be inspired." She thought of the lowly penny. She encouraged everyone at her school to offer a penny to anyone who inspired them. She asked the penny giver to say to the receiver, 'You have Penny Power. You inspired me. I hope you take this penny and pass it on to somebody else.' It's like paying it forward with a focus on inspiration.

And then the kids started bringing pennies to school!

The Forbes article quotes her as saying, “It was so moving. They were giving them to teachers and telling their teachers how much they appreciated them. They were giving them out to their aides, to our custodians, to their parents. It was like a love fest!”

The lowly penny that first produced inspiration had now generated change. The Penny Project began as a means of sharing respect, acknowledgment, and inspiration in the community, but grew into a movement that changed or improved the culture of civility.

The penny has the power of faith. In the case of the widow of today’s reading, however, it was not the penny that inspired Jesus. It was the faith that motivated the giving of her last two coins.

Jesus was always impressed by faith. Nothing moved him more, and a lack of faith was often distressing to him. The widow’s offering was an expression of faith and a test of her discipleship, and Jesus found this utterly impressive and inspirational.

The call to action for us today from this gospel reading is to find or create an opportunity to express our faith and discipleship. When we do, Jesus will not be the only one who is inspired. The power of a penny might bring life to an entire community! Amen