

“Investing”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 22, 2020

Debby Irving, from *Waking Up White*, pg. 174

I've come to feel that the straightforward airing of experiences and beliefs is a necessary, albeit uncomfortable, pathway to interpersonal and intercultural understanding and healing. Intimate human connection and enduring trust are the rewards of courageous conversation. The trick for me has been learning to stay in the conversation long enough to get to the other side, where niceness gives way to authenticity, understanding, and trust, the ingredients necessary for social stability. The futility of sweeping grievances under the rug rests in the reality that they don't disappear, they can still be felt, and worst of all, they fester and create more discord. These days I find the tension of avoiding fraught topics far more uncomfortable than a head-on courageous conversation.

Mark 12:28-34, 41-44

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, “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.”

Back when I was in high school, I worked during the summer—70 hours a week between cashiering at Rainbow Foods and working as a clerk at Dayton’s in Rosedale Mall. But for one week between my junior and senior years, I joined other youth on a mission trip to downtown Minneapolis. In that intense week, I remember driving daily past the Jesus “Love Power” mural overlooking 35W, on the way to up-close encounters with poverty. One of the mission organizations we met that week was Streetlight Ministries, operating on a shoestring budget from a Franklin Avenue storefront to offer food, clothing and other basic services to those who were homeless. I felt humbled by the faith of those who responded with whatever they had, trusting that God and the gospel could make a difference.

I was taught from childhood to give a tithe—10 percent—of my earnings back to God for use in the world. I felt called to give my tithe for those summer jobs to Streetlight Ministries, so on a late August afternoon my teenage self—big curly hair, pimples and all—walked through the glass door of the building. The woman who ran the place told me her husband was just on his way to the post office. It was past time to mail the rent check for their space, and they couldn’t wait any longer. He was sending a check but there weren’t enough funds in the bank account to cover it. “We’ve been praying for an answer all week,” she told me, “and now here *you* are!” The few hundred dollars I had come to give them was enough to make ends meet awhile longer. That’s when I started to realize how God could use the mustard seeds of their

faith and mine, with what each of us could do, and thereby sustain hope for those most in need. I learned that my work and their mission were connected by God to make possible something that seemed impossible. It wasn't about me, but about something that *God* wanted to do through the gifts entrusted to me. I had no idea it was a moment I'd be thinking about for the rest of my life.

Jesus makes sure that we're thinking about the widow's offering for the rest of our lives as well. I might have given the customary ten percent, but she puts in one hundred percent! Jesus says that her two small coins are "everything she had, all she had to live on." We might ask what misogyny and social extortion had led her to such poverty, or caution her to save something for self-survival. Nevertheless, Christ commends her offering—two coins though it is—because it is a sign of her total commitment. Others may dabble one-tenth in the practices of religious life, but she shows up whole-heartedly. Her offering might not pay for all the oil needed at the temple, but her willing spirit and faithful trust are praise that gladdens the heart of God. [Pastor Brad Roth asks](#), "We too have something at our disposal—time, money, strength, our whole lives. What or who are you willing to sacrifice for?"

I know that we are sacrificing in many important ways right now. All of us are sacrificing the freedoms of everyday, normal life, and those of us who can are staying home, sacrificing the freedom of movement and travel to beat this virus. We are sacrificing for survival, investing in meals for one another, calling neighbors who may be alone, donating supplies for healthcare workers, and learning new skills for virtual connections. These may feel like great or small actions, but they are persistent, faithful steps, like the widow and her two coins.

There's a great [article in the Star Tribune](#) today that mentions all the ways that "everyday heroes" are helping friends, neighbors and strangers in Minnesota. They're organizing video chats with seniors in nursing homes, babysitting the children of front-line healthcare workers, and putting food out in their little free libraries. But as I read the article, I wondered where the people of color were. None were featured in the photos, and none were lifted up in the text that I could see, either as "everyday heroes" or even as those who were receiving help. Noticing that, I thought again of my Facebook and Twitter feeds, and how full my online communities are of White people, folks like me in situations like mine. Where are people of color in my own efforts at connection, service, and neighborliness?

This is just one article, to be sure, but I've been wondering if the racial and economic divides in Minnesota will be made worse in the weeks and months ahead. Communities of color that tend to have lower incomes and fewer work benefits are at greater risk during these challenging times. [Research has shown](#) that African Americans suffered more greatly from the 2008 housing crisis than did other groups. Black folks haven't recovered from the last recession, and there's another one upon us. Are White folks like myself aware of the deadly disparity here, investing in "the least of these" right now or saving our time, money and strength for those who look more like us?

Debby Irving points out in her book *Waking Up White* that it can cost something for White people to risk connecting across race. We might say something wrong, misunderstand another's situation, put our foot in our mouths, or feel like the elephant in the room. Yet interracial community doesn't exist if White fragility or fear keeps us from showing up for neighbors of color as well. Hiding from discomfort or pretending racial disparities don't exist causes them to fester, Irving writes. But "courageous conversation" that addresses as equally human those people who are different from us by skin color or class opens up the possibility for "intimate human connection and enduring trust". This can be a time for

such whole-hearted investing, putting our two coins, and all we have to live on, into growing relationships with those who are different from ourselves.

You can do this personally, reaching out in particular to people of color you are connected to. They may be as well set up and protected as White neighbors and friends, but the odds are that they may struggle a bit more due to the legacy of racism. If you have means to buy restaurant gift cards or other extras right now, your support will make a greater difference in businesses owned by people of color. Where you can chip in extra money for VEAP or other short-term rescue efforts, that too will help poor people and folks of color to stay alive. We can challenge White privilege and systemic racism in broader ways too, supporting economic improvements such as the recently passed paid-sick-leave provisions for some low-wage workers, who are “[disproportionately women, immigrants and people of color](#)”. Whatever we do personally and as a society will be imperfect. That’s part of what it means to take risky steps, start courageous conversations, and live the Great Commandment of love for God, self and neighbor—all neighbors. As Christians inspired by Jesus, we are trying with heart, soul, mind and strength, investing what we have to live on like the widow at the temple, persistently seeking justice in a lifelong way.

[Benjamin Wayman writes](#) about how his predominantly white, suburban church in Greenville, Illinois, wanted to do *something* after the murder of Michael Brown and the protests in Ferguson, Missouri. So the church put up a sign that said, “Black Lives Matter”, and they kept putting more signs up each time they were defaced or taken down. This was their effort to stand in solidarity across difference, and it didn’t need to be thought out strategically in advance. Wayman writes, “Our decision to place the sign on our lawn was not the result of any grand social justice philosophy, nor a comprehensive assessment of [Black Lives Matter]. ...Our decision was more what theologian Samuel Wells calls an improvisation, an attempt to be faithful disciples at this moment, moving one step at a time.”

Beloveds, now is the time for such holy improvisation. We are led into unfamiliar territory by strange circumstances these days, but the gospel asks us to go further, setting aside what we are most comfortable with in order to discover lasting, deeper connections. May we find the courage that Benjamin Wayman describes, “to be faithful disciples at this moment, moving one step at a time”, until we see how those steps, one coin after another, have placed our lives into the treasured care of God and *all* of God’s people. Amen.