

1

When I was a student in seminary, I served a large congregation in Indianapolis as a Minister of Christian Education. The congregation had lots of children and youth, and so they had planned many creative activities throughout the years. I often heard members of the church reminisce about some of those events, especially the “Mile of Pennies.” After hearing them talk about this event so many times, I finally asked, “What is a mile of pennies?”

I then heard how they had selected a specific mission project, and they invited the children to bring lots of pennies during the year, which they taped on the floor in a line weaving around their fellowship hall. As the line grew longer and longer and wrapped around the room, they got closer and closer to a mile in length. Do you know how many pennies make up a mile? 84,480, which results in \$844.80. That’s quite a bit of penny power for a bunch of coins that most of us ignore!

Those who have a bunch of coins sitting around the house and want to get rid of them may choose to cash them at a Coinstar kiosk. In return one can get dollars, gift cards, or donate the money to a

nonprofit organization. What they handle adds up to more than a mile of pennies, for they process \$2.7 billion worth of coins annually, with more than \$20 million going to charities.¹ That’s a lot of coin power from leftover change.

The woman highlighted in Mark’s Gospel knew something about penny power, though she didn’t have a mile of them or even a kiosk to convert the two small coins into a donation. She took them to the temple. It was a small amount—two small coins worth about a penny, roughly equal to one sixty-fourth of a daily wage in that day.²

Probably no one noticed what she had done, for many people were bringing large donations that day, but Jesus happened to be watching. He commented to his disciples, “I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who’s been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on” (Mark 12:43-33, CEB).

Some preachers might take advantage of this passage and use it to suggest that members of their

2

congregation should give everything away to the church, but I don't think that was Jesus' point. He wasn't running a stewardship drive, for he didn't applaud the many wealth donations made, and I also don't think he was suggesting all his followers should enter the world of poverty. Just what was Jesus trying to say?

Right before this conversation Jesus warned his listeners about those who like to be greeted with honor in the local marketplaces and those who try to sit in the best seats at banquets, for they were often the ones who tried to cheat widows out of their homes. In other words, they were pompous and cruel.

I think what Jesus was trying to do was highlight those people who lived inspiring lives in contrast to those who led disappointing lives. Even if one looked important and yet took advantage of others, that person was a disappointment to God. In contrast, those who quietly offered whatever gifts they had were an inspiration. Jesus seemed to highlight those lives who were an inspiration, who encouraged others to offer their best.

That's something Dr. Dilhani Uswatte realized in her role as the principal of Rocky Ridge Elementary School in Hoover, Alabama. She explained her focus for life: "Take the time to inspire and be inspired. That's the motto I like to live by." She encouraged her teachers to find small ways to inspire their students, and that's when she thought of penny power. Since a penny is such a common object, she envisioned a way to turn it into an inspiration by suggesting, "The idea was that every time someone saw a penny, they'd have the courage to be mindful and notice the great things happening around them."

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.

Soon she began to see something amazing occur at her school. Listen as she explains what happened:

"Children came into school with bags of pennies—hundreds of pennies...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

3

custodians, to their parents. It was like a love fest!... We've exceeded our goal of 1,000 pennies being either given or received. We call that Penny Power because we believe that both the giver and the receiver benefit from this exchange."³

How many of you have pennies in your pockets or purses today? Maybe you have some pennies sitting around home doing nothing. You may even view them as having little value, but if you see them as an opportunity to inspire someone else, to say thank you to someone who inspired your life, they become powerful pennies.

If a penny can offer such an inspiration, think about how valuable you are in the eyes of God. What you do not only pleases God, but your actions can inspire countless people around you. A smile. An act of kindness. Gentle words. An offer of forgiveness.

Helping someone in need. A handwritten note or card sent in the mail. A silent prayer. These acts may seem small and insignificant, as ordinary as a common penny, but just like pennies can be transformed into penny power, so your acts of kindness can be transformed into powerful acts that ripple into the world.

One cannot fund an entire congregation with just one penny, of course, but together those pennies add up, just as your service in our congregation and our community plays an integral part of our life together. Maybe you can't do today what you did years ago, but each act of kindness done in the past, each act of service done today, still makes a difference in the lives around you, for through God's presence in your life, you have penny power, and that's priceless.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coinstar>

² *Harper's Bible Commentary.*

³ Rob Dube, "What The Power Of A Penny Can Teach Our Kids And Ourselves About Positive Inspiration And Leadership," 9/14/20, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robdube/2020/09/14/what-the-power-of-a-penny-can-teach-our-kids-and-ourselves-about-positive-inspiration-and-leadership>