

You know you're growing old when...

After painting the town red, you have to rest before applying a second coat. Almost everything hurts, and what doesn't hurt doesn't work. You keep repeating yourself. The best part of the day is over when the alarm clock goes off. You have too much room in the house and not enough in the medicine cabinet. You've got it all together but you don't remember what to do with it. You keep repeating yourself. Your doctor is just old enough to be your granddaughter. They light the candles on your birthday cake and a group of campers form a circle and start singing KUMBAYA. You keep repeating yourself. Your new easy chair has more options than your car. You begin every other sentence with 'Nowadays.' You look both ways before crossing a room. You keep repeating yourself. You find this list tasteless and insensitive. But you won't remember it tomorrow anyway! (HOMILETICS, May-June 2000, p. 59)

First, some gospel background. We must immediately note that Jesus begins by saying "BEWARE!" – There are people among you who wear extravagant costumes to make you think they are pious, but it is all for themselves! They "devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. This refers to the fact that women were legally prohibited from managing their financial affairs. So often religious men acted as their trustees – but were well known for enriching themselves for the service. Scribes and pharisees were PAID to offer prayers – BY THE WORD – so they offered LENGTHY prayers to make more money. Between their use of religion for prestige and their self-serving, this sort of scribe provided a powerful antithesis to the love of God and neighbor that we heard in last week's gospel. (Chad Myers, BINDING THE STRONG MAN)

Mark tells us that Jesus took His seat like a judge to scrutinize what was happening. He watched the ostentatious wealthy as they let their coins drop noisily into the coffers. Then, He fixed His attention on a widow. When Mark described her as 'poor,' he used a word that implies she was bowed down in need. She offered two *lepta*, the smallest coin that has ever been struck IN HISTORY IN ANY COUNTRY! (AT HOME WITH THE WORD, 11 November 2018, p. 145) They were probably typical of the gifts people donated to beggars like her. And of all those thronging through the area, she alone impressed Jesus so much that He pointed her out to His disciples. He wanted them to see what He saw. The other thing about this passage is that in Mark's gospel, it occurs shortly after Jesus had driven the merchants from the outer court of the Temple, and now He was condemning the activity that took place in the second court, The Court of Women. Jesus had accused His people of making the outer court a bazaar rather than a place of encounter with God. Now, He noted that the business of the second court went so far as to counteract God's command to care for widows and orphans by inducing the neediest to sacrifice for the affluent. And having spoken His piece, Jesus left the Temple area. This was His last visit to the Temple. As practiced specialists in missing the point, the disciples followed Him out – and then made admiring comments on how beautiful was the Temple! Realizing that their values were still skewed, Jesus simply told them that it was all going to fall apart – a statement that underlined the scandal of the widow's offering.

Now those who put the lectionary together intended us to interpret the Gospel story in light of the story of Elijah and the poor widow who shared her home and food with him. The widow accepted Elijah's request for food, telling him that if he wished, he could share the last meal she and her son would eat before dying of starvation. The widow of Zarephath was not duped like the people who donate the little they have to those who do not need it. She acted in solidarity with a hungry prophet. If she were going to die of hunger, why not share her last morsel with someone else who was in the same situation? By deciding to help Elijah, the widow showed that even in the direst of straits, she remained the author of her own life story. If she and

her son were going to die, at least they would not die selfish. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 11 November 2018, p. 1-2)

OK, there are many ways we could depart from our text from here so that we can make a personal application. So second, a word about hypocrisy. I'll never forget one of my scripture professors doing a pretty clever number on the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, and all of us seminarians laughing quite heartily. Then he said: "And just remember, gentlemen – that you will one day sit in their chairs." We didn't laugh anymore. It's a sobering thing to try to be what is often called a 'religious leader.' I think most of us in this position are pretty aware that we are not saints and that we still have a long way to go on our religious journey. To then be tasked with trying to help others on their spiritual path is a very humbling thing. Because we know we still operate with a lot of blindness. It's always much easier to see the speck in another's eye and to miss the plank in our own.

The church, at its worst, is a gathering of people who want to think of themselves as the kind of people who come to church! A Frank and Ernest cartoon sheds more light on who we are than we want to admit. Ernest asks, "Frank, did you learn anything about yourself in your first session with your therapist?" Frank responds, "Some negatives and some positives." "Well, Frank, what were the negatives?" "It seems that I am self-centered, controlling, defensive, greedy and moody." "Yikes! But what about the positives?" "Well, the biggest positive is that I feel really good about who I am." (Brett Younger, LECTINARY HOMILETICS, Aug-Sept 2012, p. 44) Hypocrisy has been called prejudice with a halo. (Ambrose Bierce) When I was pastor of the Newman Center in Chapel Hill, one of the bars in town took out an ad in the college newspaper – THE DAILY TARHEEL -- during the days before the annual Parents Weekend at the college. The bar was frequented by students. The ad read: "Bring your Parents to Lunch Saturday. We'll Pretend We Don't Know you!" So then we put in the church bulletin the following year before Parents Weekend: "Bring Your Parents to Church next Sunday. We'll Pretend We DO Know You!"

Someone once said to me, "I'd rather watch a Television evangelist than go down there to the church with all those hypocrites." I wanted to say to him, "Well one more won't hurt," but instead I thought of how participation in a congregation made up of imperfect sinners trains us in the life of discipleship: we learn forgiveness, patience, forbearance, kindness, understanding, and encouragement. (LECTIONAID, Sept-Nov 2008, p. 6) The essence of hypocrisy is when I become much more concerned that you live YOUR life according to my expectations than I am truly living my OWN life according to my expectations. Coercing another to live with my expectations through the power of law or the power of eternity makes such hypocrisy not simply burdensome but hellish. This binds both of us into the painful dance that mimics life but is anything except life giving. (Donald Denton, LLECTIONAID, Sept-Nov 2005)

The poet Kathleen Norris sums it up best: "Not long ago, I was asked by a college student how I could stand to go to church, how I could stand the hypocrisy of Christians. I had one of my rare inspirations, when I know the right thing to say, and I replied, 'The only hypocrite I have to worry about on Sunday morning is myself.... Even when I find church boring, I try to hold this in mind as a possibility: like all the other fools who have dragged themselves to church on Sunday morning, including the pastor, I am there because I need to be reminded that love can be at the center of all things, if we only keep it there. I am profoundly moved by the hospitality of Cecil Williams, the pastor of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco, who says, simply, "When people come to Glide, we don't ask them if they are atheists, Methodists, or Buddhists. We ask them what their names are and how they're doing." (THE CLOISTER WALK, p. 346-348) That would be a good guide for us – leaving to the angels at the end of time the task of judging the dragnet of our gathering. For the moment it's

enough just to know one another's names and ask how they are doing. (adapted from Bausch, THE PARISH OF THE NEXT MILLENNIUM, p. 224)

Finally, generosity. In many ways generosity is the external proof that the Gospel has taken root in our hearts. It is a lie to say that we love God if we do not love our neighbor, and generosity is at the very core of that love of neighbor. And it is also a delusion to think that we are a good Catholic if we do not support the church. A Christian who is not generous is no Christian at all. The gospel challenges us in ways that are difficult but profound. Time and again we are called to give something up, but only so that we can become more perfectly who God created us to be. It is just one of the ways that Christianity invites us into a paradox. It is by giving that we receive, and even more so, it is by giving that we BECOME." (Matthew Kelly, THE FOUR SIGNS OF A DYNAMIC CATHOLIC, p. 128)

We can learn about generosity from creation itself. Consider this lesson learned from the sun by the medieval Sufi mystic Hafiz.

Even after all this time

The sun never says to the earth,

'You owe me.'

Look what happens

With a love like that,

It lights up the Whole Sky.

I find it fascinating that this Muslim mystic, is saying basically the same thing as the 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of Hippo and Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine, who called nature 'the first Bible,' and called nature 'vestigis dei,' 'footprints of God.'

Generosity is learned by watching creation. Not only the sun is generous, but parents are called upon to be generous. And elders are generous, and lovers and friends are generous. We are a species capable of generosity. Generosity is related etymologically to creation and kinship (Genesis, for example) and creativity (generativity) and givingness. Generosity is like compassion: both are required elements of full living but both seem in rather short supply in our institutions and in our species at this time. We have old lessons to learn from the sun, earth, and sky: how the sun gives so much away and does not ask the earth for repayment. Instead, as Hafiz observes, it lights up the whole sky. Can we learn our capacity for generosity all over again from creation? Then we too can light up the whole sky.....Let the church say AMEN. (Last section adapted from Mary Hembrow Snyder, Ed., SPIRITUAL QUESTIONS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY – ESSAYS IN HONOR OF JOAN D. CHITTISTER, p. 144-145)