

Not starting with a joke today – I've got several worked into the homily – so that means you'll have to try to stay awake to hear them! Sorry to disturb your nap time!

The episode of the poor widow forms an overture to Mark's passion account. The woman gave 'everything she had,' literally 'her whole life' (v.44). This complete self-giving foreshadows the self-sacrifice that Jesus is about to make on the cross – the offering of His very life without reservation. The widow is one of several, often unnamed, female characters in the Passion accounts who respond with greater faith than the 12 male disciples and thus serve as models for future disciples who read the Gospel.

As Jesus is teaching on the grounds of the temple, he offers 2 contrasting lessons about the appropriate behavior of a disciple. First, he warns against the conduct of the scribes who use their religious position to bring attention to themselves. They use the garments of their office to get noticed and get privileged seating. In striking contrast to this hypocrisy, Jesus presents the example of the poor widow, who puts her 2 small coins into the temple treasury. Though the monetary value of her offering is insignificant, her gift represents total abandonment of herself to God. In contrast to the scribes, whose practice of religion is all show, she seeks to give honor to God with perfect surrender and trust.

This is an odd detail – but we are told that Jesus intentionally sits down where He can watch as people put their monetary donations into the treasury! Apparently Jesus thinks it's important for priests to know HOW MUCH parishioners give! He could easily have listened as well because the metal coins would reverberate when tossed into the containers. Many wealthy people put in large amounts, accompanied by loud clanging. But the poor widow puts in 2 small coins, creating 2 small pings. The word denotes the smallest coin in circulation at the time, an insignificant amount. The fact that she puts in 2 is significant because she could have chosen to keep 1 for herself. But Jesus does not view her donation as insignificant. In fact, He calls His disciples to witness her example, and He makes the point: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury." (V. 43) The others were giving out of their surplus, whereas she gave out of her want, contributing all she had to live on. She illustrates the teaching of Jesus that commitment to God is expressed in wholehearted love, an offering that is "much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." (12:33)

We can discover a further meaning to the contrast between the poor woman and the greedy scribes when we notice the key word *widow* links both scenes. Because widows were some of the most vulnerable members of society, the Torah mandated special care for them, and the prophets denounced those who defrauded them. Jesus reproaches the scribes not only for their hypocrisy but especially because "they devour widows' houses" (v. 40). Though the precise practice to which Jesus is referring here is uncertain, the scribes in some way were using their status to exploit the widows for financial gain.

With this connection between the 2 scenes in mind, the action of the poor widow may be interpreted as an instance of the way the scribes prey upon the piety of the vulnerable widows to extort offerings from them far beyond what they can afford. The words of Jesus, in this sense, may be read as a lament of a religious system that takes advantage of the woman by prompting her to give her last cent. The fact that, in the verses immediately following this scene, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple adds weight to this interpretation.

Though commentators debate whether the Gospel writer intended to praise the widow's action or deplore it, it seems that both meanings can be contained within the scene. Because the woman's total giving

precedes the Passion account, her action in the temple is a preview of Jesus' gift of His whole life. But because the widow's gift of her livelihood follows the condemnation of greedy temple officials and precedes the forecast of a crumbled temple, it seems that Jesus laments this woman's offering as the result of religious abuse. Like the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the cross, the woman's gift is both an injustice and a selfless offering. The scene is both lamentable and commendable, like the scene of crucifixion that will bring the Gospel to its climax and conclusion. (adapted from Stephen J. Binz. WOMEN OF THE GOSPELS, p. 132-133)

Now you probably thought this was going to be a homily on stewardship – but it's not! The text is more complicated than that – so here are 2 applications of this text for us. The scribes are hypocrites. Hypocrisy is particularly deadly when it is practiced by religious people. 2 men meet on the street. One says to the other, 'Have you heard about Harry? He embezzled the company out of a million dollars!'

The other man says, "That's terrible; I never did trust Harry."

The first man says, "Not only that, he left town and he took Tom's wife with him."

The other man says, 'That's awful; Harry has always been a ne'er-do-well.'

The first man says, "Not only that, they think he was drunk when he pulled out of town."

The other man says, "Harry's no good all right. But now we have a problem – who's going to teach his Faith Formation Class this Sunday?"

Of course, anyone can be a phony. A pastor was preaching an impassioned sermon on the evils of television. "It steals away precious time that could be better spent on other things," he said, advising the congregation to do what he and his family had done. "We put our TV away in the closet."

"That's right," his wife mumbled, "and it gets awfully crowded in there." (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Vol XXXVI, 2020, p. 49)

So we all hear people complain about the church because it is 'full of hypocrites.' Every place everywhere is full of hypocrites! Tell me about it! You know about the priest who ran off with the parish secretary. I know one too. Or a priest who was a pedophile. I know one too. Or the church goer who committed adultery. I know them too. I'm embarrassed at the way some priests act. I'm embarrassed by the way some Catholics act. I'm embarrassed by the way I act! But to let the hypocrisy of some stand in the way of our coming to Church is like saying we refuse to own a car because we had a lemon once!

Hypocrisy comes in many many forms. Most Catholics spend more time protesting abortion than we do opening our homes and our wallets to promote the adoption of the babies whose lives may be terminated. We put fish symbols and pro-life stickers on our bumpers – and cut people off when we drive. We cheat on our taxes and demand that the poor take care of themselves. We say that we are good Catholics and give stingily in the collection. Christians, including priests, are no different from everyone else. And sometimes, like everyone else, we fail and we fall. But God picks us up again; and helps us go on. Hypocrisy is part of the life of all of us. But honest prayer challenges us to face our shortcomings – and ask God to help us deal with them.

Third, Jesus holds up this woman as a great example of trust. Trust is critical in all of life. For example, a wife comes home late at night and quietly opens the door to her bedroom. From under the blanket she sees 4 legs instead of 2. She reaches for a baseball bat and starts hitting the blanket as hard as she can. Once she's done, she goes to the kitchen to have a drink. As she enters, she sees her husband there, reading a magazine.

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“Hi Darling,” he says, “Your parents have come to visit us, so I let them stay in our bedroom. Did you say hello?”

Trust is critical in every relationship – but especially in our life with God. No matter how difficult our circumstances, God will never forget us nor forsake us. Corrie ten Boom worked in her father’s watch-making business in the Netherlands and led a youth group for teenage girls. She instructed them in the Christian faith and held classes in the performing arts and sewing. Her family had a comfortable life until the Nazis invaded the Netherlands in 1940. As Nazi soldiers began gathering up Jewish citizens for deportation to concentration camps, Corrie and her family made a costly decision: to save as many Jewish citizens as possible.

They constructed a secret room behind a closet in their house. In this room, they hid Jewish citizens who were at risk of capture by the Nazis. They also joined the Dutch Resistance movement that smuggled as many Jews as possible out of the Netherlands and to safer countries. It is estimated that the ten Boom family smuggled 800 Jewish people out of the Netherlands. Sadly, someone in their town reported them to the Nazis, and all the members of the ten Boom family were sent to concentration camps.

Corrie and her sister, Betsie, were sent to the brutal Ravensbruck concentration camp. Like the other prisoners, they were stripped of their clothes and beaten. They were fed just enough to keep from starving to death. They lived in constant threat of death. Instead of cowering in despair, Corrie and Betsie held worship services among the women in the camp. They refused to give up their faith in a good God, even when their faith and good works had brought them to this brutal concentration camp.

In December 1944, Betsie died at Ravensbruck. Corrie was released 12 days later. A few days after Corrie’s release all the women of her age group at Ravensbruck were sent to the gas chambers. Rodney L. Holman, author of a commentary on the Book of Mark, suggests we try to see Corrie ten Boom the way Jesus saw her. To the outside world, she was a middle-aged woman now. She was emaciated from lack of food. Dirty from lack of hygiene in the camps. Bruised and battered by the guards. She was poor and vulnerable because the guards had taken everything from her. But in Jesus’ eyes, she was worthy of praise. She had given everything she had. Just like Jesus.

After Corrie’s release from the concentration camp, she returned to the Netherlands and opened a rehabilitation center for victims of the concentration camps. She wrote books about her family’s experiences in the war and traveled all over the world sharing her faith in Christ. One of her more famous quotes is, ‘Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.’ I really like that: “Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”

That was the widow’s secret. That is the essence of faith. Faith is not an outward show of piety but an inner trust that God will provide us with everything we need. The widow in the temple had that kind of trust in God and gave her all to Him. Jesus praised her for that. May it be so for you and for me. Amen. (last section adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2021, p. 44-45)