NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Two daring women

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez Illustration by Mark Bartholomew | Nov. 10, 2012 Spiritual Reflections

Jesus chose unlikely role models for his disciples to emulate. In a society where children were regarded as the property of their fathers, with no rights or voice of their own, Jesus set forth a child and claimed that the kingdom of God belongs to ?such as these.? He also held up people who were thought to be ritually unclean or even sinful because of a physical malady or their ethnicity (the Gerasene demoniac, the woman with a hemorrhage in Mark 5; the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7; the boy with a demon in Mark 9; blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10). Jesus praised them as exemplars of faith whose trust and reliance on God he wished to cultivate in his followers. The unlikely role models in today?s liturgy are two widows.

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In contemporary society, a widow is a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried. As her husband?s equal partner, she generally inherits his estate, and although her days may be lonely, she is not defenseless, nor has she lost any rights or status in the absence of her spouse.

Jewish widows in Jesus? day were far less fortunate. When her husband died, the widow could return to her family if her dowry or purchase price could be paid to her husband?s heirs. With no rights or status of her own, the widow could even be sold into slavery to repay any unsatisfied debt. Unlike widows of other cultures in the ancient Near Eastern world, Jewish widows were not legally provided for except in the case of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), which was not always enforceable.

Given her precarious status, it is not surprising that the Hebrew word for widow is *almanah*, a term that has at its root *alem*, meaning ?unable to speak? or, in Aramaic, ?to be in pain.? Thus, says Bonnie Bowman Thurston, the widow was the silent, helpless one whose lack of legal status left her exposed to oppression and harsh treatment (*The Widows*, Fortress Press, 1989).

The scriptural authors have set before us today two widows whose courage in the face of difficulty challenges our own behavior as Jesus? disciples. Neither the widow who offered hospitality to Elijah (first reading) nor the widow who gave all she had to the temple treasury (Gospel) could be described as prudent. A prudent person would reason that ?charity begins at home.? The first widow could have turned Elijah away in order to take care of herself and her son, instead of using all her flour and oil to make a meal for a stranger (and a foreigner at that). Similarly, if the woman in the Gospel had been practical and prudent, she could have kept her coins, or at most, given only one of them to the temple treasury. But, like her counterpart in the first reading, the widow in today?s Marcan Gospel gave all she had.

In their actions, both widows revealed priorities that had little to do with prudence or practicality. Hospitality, as exercised in the ancient world, placed the care of the guest above one?s own needs and desires. Just as Abraham graciously tended to the three visitors at Mamre (Genesis 18) and was graced with the presence of God and the promise of a son through them, so did the good widow of Zarephath tend to Elijah. In giving all she had to live on to the temple, the poor widow in the Gospel indicated that she revered God above all else, even her very life.

In their daring, in their faith, in their generosity and utter trust in God, these widows teach Jesus? disciples that their base of security is not to be found in a stocked pantry or a hefty bank account but in God. Each time I remember the example of these women, my mind returns to a lesson taught me by the father of a dear friend from high school. The Guerrettes had a gas station and grocery story in rural Caribou, Maine. When a family stopped for gas and their funds were short, Mr. Guerrette did not refuse them. Not only did he pump their gas; he often ran in to see what Mrs. Guerrette might be cooking for dinner. In a flash, he wrapped it up and loaded it into the car of the needy family and off they drove with fuel for their car and food for their bodies ? all due to the thoughtfulness of a good man and his family. When friends and neighbors called him to task for such imprudent behavior, Mr. Guerrette would smile and say, ?It may be foolish in your eyes but it is the right and Christian thing to do.? After he died of a heart attack at a very young age, Mr. Guerrette?s actions were long and gratefully remembered. Like the widows represented in today?s liturgy, people like Mr. Guerrette remind us of the daring and impracticality Jesus? disciples are challenged to have. We are to trust and believe so fully in God that we are willing to give all we have and all we are, holding back nothing.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/21/2014 - 23:11*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections/two-daring-women