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Scriptures give us extraordinary examples of generosity

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The Peace Pulpit

This morning?s Scriptures give us some extraordinary examples of generosity and sharing of goods. Both the first lesson and the Gospel lesson give us the example of the poor, even the poorest of the poor, sharing everything they have. That widow from Zarepheth who is encountered by Elijah asking her for food tells him, ?This is all I have, the last cup of flour and this little bit of oil. When I bake the bread and my son and I eat it, we will die.?

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Kings 17:10-16
Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
Hewbrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Full text of the readings [1]

Elijah assures her that God will provide. She goes ahead and shares with him this last food that is available to her and her son. In the Gospel lesson, the widow with just two small coins, not from her abundance but from her very meager poverty, puts those in the Temple treasury. It?s apparent that you could hardly find more extraordinary examples of sharing, not from one?s abundance, but from one?s very need. We might wonder first of all, should we really give away everything we have, or should be try to be responsible enough to care for our needs and take care of our needs and the needs of those for whom we are responsible?

Of course, the answer to that is yes. We have a responsibility to try to achieve for ourselves the full human life God intends, and yet, the two widows are examples for us, first of all, because of their generosity. Even out of their need, they are willing to share what little they have. If someone else needs it, they will share that tiny bit. That?s the first thing we need to learn from these women is the willingness to share always whatever is needed by others, out of our abundance or out of our poverty, the attitude of sharing.

There is something more that we need to draw from these two examples. First of all, what we share is not really ours. This is an attitude that is difficult for us in our country. Our culture especially glorifies the idea of the self-made person. I did it. I worked for it. it?s mine. Really, we need to understand as these examples in the Scriptures show us, it?s not really mine. Everything I have ultimately comes from God. All of creation is God?s gift. Everything I have, all my talents, all I?ve been able to do. All of this is ultimately a gift from God.

That is the attitude we have to have, or must try to develop. I can?t say this is mine. I?ve earned it. I have a right to keep it for myself alone. No, because God made the world for all, and everything in the world is for all. Every person in the world has a right to what is necessary for a full human life. That is the first thing we must learn. Secondly, there is an extraordinary example here of people who are willing to trust In God and place their security not in material goods that ultimately aren?t going to really count, who do not put their trust and security into goods of this earth, but ultimately understand that God who drew us into being out of love, that God who supports us at every moment of our existence out of love, that God is always there for us.

From the widows, we learn to trust and have this profound sense of trust in God. We put our security in God. That takes prayer and reflection, and probably for most of us, a continuing conversion, first of all, to be very generous because what we have is not really ours, but secondly, to have this profound trust in God. Prayer and reflection will help us to come to these attitudes. There is more that we need to learn from today?s lessons. It?s

important for us, especially in the Gospel lesson, to remember the context.

As the lesson began, Jesus was teaching and was talking about the religious leaders and the teachers of the law, who enjoyed walking around in their long robe being greeted in the marketplace and liked to occupy the reserved seats at banquets and so on. These people have such a great attitude about themselves and think themselves so important and worthy of all kinds of attention, that Jesus challenges them. Then He uses them as Exhibit A to show what He means. In contrast, He holds up the widow who is not trying to get the first place, who doesn?t have this exaggerated notion of her importance, but gives from her need.

Jesus is saying, ?Beware of being like those so-called teachers of the law.? We need to develop a sense of our self-worth surely, but not exaggerated self-worth, and not a sense that we have a right to all that we can get. Jesus uses the widow as a counter-example to the religious leaders, and is even concerned that the religious leaders are exploiting the poor, challenging them to give for the benefit of the religious leaders. That?s exploitation. That?s injustice, and that?s why Jesus says, ?How severe a sentence they will receive.?

In this context, it?s important for us to look not just at our own personal giving and our attitude towards material goods and our sense of trust in God, but also to look at how things are organized in our society, to discover if there is exploitation of the poor going on. That can happen not just from individuals acting unjustly, but because we establish economic political structures that bring about exploitation of the poor.

In fact, we are at a critical point right now after this very recent Presidential election and now having to confront the economic problems that were put off until the election was over, to try to deal with the fact that in our country, the system is working in such a way that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Over the last 30 years, the small number of very rich people have accumulated to themselves the vast majority of the wealth of our country and a larger and larger number of people are poor.

That is because we don?t have just wages for jobs. People aren?t on the minimum wage in our country. That makes the situation where people working full time do not earn enough to support themselves and their families. We have a tax structure that allows the rich to pay far less, percentage-wise, on their taxes than the middle class or the poor people. Obviously, these are unjust and we?re going to be facing a period of time now in our government that there are going to be struggles over this. All of us have a responsibility to try to look into what is going on.

We must try to examine it as well as we can, and to try to promote efforts to bring about a just sharing of the goods of our country. Then beyond our country, in our relationship with other countries of the world, there is much we have to do. All I say to day is in light of the Scripture lessons, be willing to examine these problems to follow what is happening and to try to share in the effort to make our society a society where everyone has an opportunity to share in the goods that God gave for all.

It?s a tremendous challenge and we might think it is beyond us, but we really can?t think that because it?s not beyond us if we want to take the time and effort to struggle, to understand and then to work for the kind of change that will make justice happen. This is the challenge of today?s readings and perhaps we can be motivated finally and most of all by our second reading today, where the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is contrasting Jesus as the high priest who offered the sacrifice once and for all, not like the human priests, serving in the Temple who day after day offered sacrifice.

Jesus? sacrifice is the sacrifice of giving Himself once, totally, pouring forth all of His life, all of His love, upon us to bring about the transformation through love, and to change the evils in our world through love, to transform this world into the Reign of God. In the same way, Jesus sacrificed Himself once to take away the sins of all. There will be no further questions when He comes again to give fullness of life for those waiting for Him. He himself, when He was living, proclaimed, ?I, when I am lifted up, will draw all to Myself.?

Through love, that total love that Jesus exemplifies for us is what we need to look to most of all, and to try to enter into that spirit of Jesus, that sacrifice of Jesus, that total giving of Jesus for all of us, to begin to be like Jesus in giving of ourselves for the benefit of all of our brothers and sisters in order to transform our world into the Reign of God.

[Bishop Gumbleton gave this homily at St. Leo in Detroit, Mich.]

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