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Have you ever cringed at least a little at the story of the widow's mite? Did you ever wonder if Jesus really wanted a poor, vulnerable woman to "give her whole livelihood" to the Temple treasury? Have you suspected that it sounds like the scam-religion propagated by guys in fancy suits who promise that if you send them your money, God will bless you abundantly? (If the story does not seem to fit with the rest of Jesus' preaching, perhaps we have gotten it wrong.)

Let us take another look at today's Gospel selection. In the first part, Jesus issued a public service announcement: "Beware! There are people among you who wear extravagant costumes to make you think they are pious, but it is all for themselves! They use their positions to defraud others!"

After he said that, Jesus sat down in the "women's court" of the Temple, the area which included the collection urns — a religious geography that indicated that although women were not allowed into the holier space beyond that court, they could still contribute to the establishment.

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 coins in circulation. One can well imagine that they were typical of the gifts people donated to beggars like her. Of all those thronging through the area, she impressed Jesus so much that pointed her out to his disciples. He wanted them to see what he saw.

It is hard to imagine that Jesus spoke with anything but fury as he challenged the disciples to understand what they had just witnessed. He had recently driven the merchants from the outer court of the Temple, and now he was condemning the activity that took place in the second court. 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.

Having spoken his piece, Jesus left the Temple area. That 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 wondrous structure of the renovated 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.

Today's first reading, the story of Elijah and the poor widow who shared her home and food with him can help us interpret the Gospel story. 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. This was a case of the poorest giving to the needy.

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. 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.

We might use this week's readings as a guide to living and giving — perhaps a well-timed heads-up just two weeks before the Thanksgiving/Christmas season. First of all, Jesus' critique of the scribes' habits is a call to beware of pretentious status seekers and every advertisement that tells us which product will make us important, loveable or, most of all, enviable. Jesus' ongoing critique of such vacuous status symbols was the Christian Scripture's version of pointing out that "the emperor has no clothes."

Secondly, the combination of Jesus' observation of Temple practices and the story of Elijah and the widow invite us to evaluate our giving. Today's Gospel condemns any approach to economics that asks the poor to sustain the prosperous — that would include everything from manipulative televangelists to regressive tax systems. The story of the widow of Zarephath offers the Gospel alternative. From her sharing with Elijah to Jesus' gift of his life, we see that the sort of giving God asks of us creates communities of solidarity.

## **1 KINGS 17:10-16**

This selection follows the introduction of Elijah in the Book of Kings. The first verses of 1 Kings 17 introduce Elijah as the prophet who confronted King Ahab of Israel, a truly wicked monarch whose marriage to Jezebel led him to ever-greater apostasy and idolatry. Elijah starts his career by letting Ahab know that because of his evil works, the country will see "neither dew nor rain" until Elijah calls for an end to the drought. Not surprisingly, after he delivered the message, Elijah had to go into hiding.

In the beginning, Elijah didn't suffer from the drought because God sent ravens to bring him bread for breakfast and meat in the evenings. But the wadi, (a temporary run-off stream) by which he was camping went dry. So, God sent him to a Phoenician widow with whom he was to wait out the drought.

Upon arriving in the town of Zarephath, Elijah saw the widow and asked her for drink and a bit of bread. Her response revealed both her character and her plight. Recognizing him as an Israelite, she replied with an oath in the name of his God, swearing that her situation was so dire that she not only had no bread to give, but that she was about to empty her flour jar to prepare the last meal she and her son would eat before dying of starvation. Having heard her oath, Elijah responded in the name of his God and promised that "the jar of flour will not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Lord sends rain upon the earth." And so it happened.

We might ask why the tradition preserved this story and what it tells us today. When we begin to consider details, we discover some interesting principles embedded in the story. To begin with, Elijah's first retreat was a hideout where nature was on his side. God's good creation preserved Elijah from the drought and famine his people were suffering.

In phase two, Elijah was displaced like any of the others who had to flee to stay alive. When he arrived in the territory of his archenemies, Ahab and Jezebel, he was humbled to the point of asking the poorest, most vulnerable person in the area for help. He invited her to stand with him and bet her life on the providence of the God of Israel. She accepted his request and received the prophet's reward: The three of them survived the drought. This second stage was crucial in Elijah's formation. He who had been the powerful prophet, outcast for his allegiance to God, learned humility as the widow stood in solidarity with him. In turn, both of them were blessed.

Although Elijah is the center of the story, the widow is really the person we might call the ethical example. Deuteronomy 24:17-22 is one of a number of sections of the Hebrew Scriptures demanding that Israelites see to the needs of the widows, orphans and foreigners in their land. In an exemplary turnabout, our nameless, destitute, pagan widow fulfills the Jewish law as she takes in Elijah the exile, thereby becoming the witness from whom the prophet needed to learn about trust and solidarity.

## **PSALMS 146:7, 8-9, 9-10**

Psalms 146 is the first of the four "Hallel" (Alleluia) psalms that conclude the psalter. The word we translate as Alleluia comes from the Hebrew, "Hallel," which is a call to praise. The ending comes from "jah," an abbreviation of the name of God.

Our refrain is a holistic call to prayer: “Praise the Lord, my soul!” In the Hebrew mindset, the soul is a person’s life-center, the locus of their desire, appetites, emotions, passions, and even breath. We might say it represents our unique being and aliveness. Thus, when we say, “Praise the Lord, my soul,” we are implying what Psalm 103 makes explicit in its opening line, “Bless the Lord, my soul; all my being, bless God’s holy name.” When we consider this, we realize that we need some time to gather ourselves, to be fully conscious of what we are saying if we want to pray this line with our whole heart.

The verses chosen for liturgy today remind us of God’s goodness to the needy. We sing to God who is faithful, who relieves the oppressed and captives, who gives food to the hungry and sight to the blind. We repeat that God looks after the widow and the orphan. We sing that God loves the just, a reminder that those who strive for justice not only promote the life God desires for all creatures, but actually give God real pleasure.

This song of joy proclaims that God’s ways, God’s goodness and care for the lowly will provide the plotline of the final chapter of history while the way of the wicked will be thwarted. Singing this prayer commits us to be a part of bringing about God’s will for the oppressed, hungry, captives, strangers and widows. If we are not for them, our words of praise will not ring true.

### **HEBREWS 9:24-28**

As Hebrews goes on with its comparison of Christ’s priesthood and that of human beings, the author makes his point with a subtle reminder that when we are dealing with Christ, we are dealing with the transformative fulfillment of history. The author reminds us that our sanctuaries, from the Temple in Jerusalem to St. Peter’s in Rome or to a rural chapel in Madagascar, are nothing more than poor copies of the true one. Like David who wanted to build a place to house (and to limit or circumscribe?) God’s presence, human groups through the ages have fashioned our holy spaces as copies of what we think God’s abode is or should be.

The author reminds us that Christ entered into the sanctuary of heaven itself, the full, unimaginable and illimitable presence of God. Because Christ has completed his task of revealing God to the world, there is no more need for sacrifice, no more offering required. When the author says that Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages, he is proclaiming that history has come to its conclusion. The message here is that all human striving has approached its resolution. We need no more trial and error, no more wondering like Job about the meaning of life.

In the early 1990s, an American political economist named Francis Fukuyama published a paper and a book saying that with the end of the Cold War and the triumph of the West, humanity has reached “the end of history.” By that, he meant that the evolution toward the best possible human society had reached its goal in liberal democracy. Almost thirty years later as we see the state of the world, that thesis could be cause for despair.

Christianity’s response to Fukuyama, Marx and others who think the end is in sight is the “already and not yet” of today’s reading. Christ appeared “at the end of the ages,” revealing the meaning and purpose of life as union with God. That is the “already.” He will appear again — for us as individuals and for all of creation — to bring the fullness of salvation. That is the “not yet.” In between the two, we live in history, challenged to do our part to bring it to its completion in Christ.

### **MARK 12:38-44**

This week’s Gospel begins by depicting scribes as the antithesis of Elijah and his widow friend. These scribes have precious little in common with the one we watched in conversation with Jesus last week. Like fashion queens whose clothing tells the world how much they can afford, the flamboyant scribes flaunt the religious garb that sets them apart from profane society. But even worse than their silly costume parades, Jesus says they “devour the houses of widows.”

This probably refers to the fact that because women were legally prohibited from managing their financial affairs, the religious men acted as their trustees and were famous for over-compensating themselves for the service. (See Chad Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*) Between their use of religion for prestige and their self-serving, this sort of scribe provided a too-powerful living antithesis to the love of God and neighbor.

The second incident we hear about in today’s Gospel brings us into the Temple itself, to what was called the Court of the Women. The Temple of Jesus’ day was anything but place of hushed and reverent silence. It bustled with pilgrims,

vendors, priests directing worshippers, and probably pickpockets and people who simply wanted to gawk. The first courtyard of the Temple was called the Court of the Gentiles. Everyone was allowed to enter there and they would find themselves in what was like a marketplace. In this court, people could change their money and purchase animals for sacrifice. The next section was called the women's court because women could advance no further than this area. This court held the treasure chests into which people could put their sacrificial and charitable offerings. According to Mark, this is where Jesus sat facing the area where people made their donations. Mark has subtly positioned Jesus as a judge of what is happening in front of him.

The statement, "Many rich people put in large sums," points out that the public could see just what each donor was offering — at least in a general way. The ostentatious givers mirrored the scribes who loved attention. But what caught Jesus' attention was a poor woman whose demeanor must have matched the miniscule donation she was able to offer.

It would be no surprise to think that Jesus had to call his disciples' attention to her. She exemplified those whom society deems inconsequential, apparently having little or nothing to contribute to anyone. Still, she made her offering to the treasury, perhaps as a statement of her dignity and self-worth.

According to Scripture scholar Chad Myers, Jesus called his disciples to pay attention to her, not to praise her sacrifice, but to critique the business of the Temple and its so-called religiosity. The same religious leaders whom Jesus had just condemned for their pretense had also convinced people like the widow to provide for them and their treasury. Unlike the sacrifice of solidarity of the widow of Zarephath who shared her morsel with Elijah and then received his help, the sacrifice of the widow in the Temple was unilateral. No one even paid attention, much less brought God's blessings to her.

This week's readings lead us to evaluate all our "religious" activity. The underlying question is "Whom do we serve?" The criteria for judging is how well our actions build solidarity and help the needy.

## **Planning: 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

Today's readings seem almost tailor-made for focusing on the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD), whose collection will be gathered next weekend in the U.S. Of course, the Lectionary was arranged before the CCHD was even conceived, so these texts weren't chosen to promote the collection.

Perhaps, it is more appropriate to wonder why these texts were chosen for this Sunday so close to the end of the liturgical year. During November, we are guided to think about the last things and the end of life. That should lead us to reevaluate our lives and our life goals.

Today, we hear first of the widow at Zarephath, whose generosity toward the prophet Elijah led to a miraculous source of flour and oil to sustain her and her son through the drought afflicting her land. In the Gospel, we hear of another widow who gave so generously to the Temple treasury that she earned the admiration of the Savior.

It is best to use the long form of the Gospel today, because the contrast between the scribes who devour the houses of the widows and the generous widow at the Temple makes the point more obvious and potent.

The second reading also focuses our attention on ultimate issues. "Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, so also Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him."

While these readings offer an easy opportunity to preach about the Campaign for Human Development, planners might also devote some attention to how well the parish cares for widows and widowers in its midst. With Social Security and pensions, many of them may be doing okay financially (though many may not, too), there are other ways in which those who have lost their spouse need the attention and care of the community. So many parish events assume that people will

attend as couples. Even when that is not the case, widows and widowers may need extra encouragement to stay involved in parish activities that they once shared with their spouse.

In the petitions today, remember those who are grieving, those who are alone, those who are struggling to make ends meet, those who are lonely, and also those who need to remember their own dependence on God even if they are well-off financially.

Materials for the CCHD can be found online at [www.usccb.org](http://www.usccb.org). (Search for “Catholic Campaign for Human Development collection.”) Sample intercessions are also available there, in the bilingual resource guide. Planners and preachers should help people see this collection as an opportunity for loving our neighbors, not just another plea for money.

## Prayers: 32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

### Introduction

No matter how many times we say we trust in the Lord, we often live as if we are in charge of our own lives and dependent only on our own talents. We are reminded today that not only are we called to live in utter surrender and dependence on our Lord, but we are to give from our very poverty to those who are in need. We must trust God will provide for us as we empty ourselves to care for the poor and the oppressed. It is a risky way to live but it is the life of faith and trust to which we are called.

### Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you raise up those who are bowed down, Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you intercede for us until the end of time, Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to lives of generosity and trust, Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for the needs of the church, of this gathered community and for our world.

**Minister** For the church, for Pope Francis, our bishop and all of the faithful people of God, for the ability to be counted among the just and the faithful who care for the oppressed and poor, we pray,

- For world leaders and all who create public policy, for work promoting justice and the common good, for a way of life that ensures dignity for all human life, we pray,
- For courage to imitate the faith of the widow, to offer what we have trusting God to fill our need, we pray,
- For the humility to see the poverty in each of our lives as an invitation to rely on God’s strength, we pray,
- For all the sick of our parish community; for those who live with addiction or face depression each day, for all who yearn for healing, we pray,
- For service men and women and for all who have given their lives in service to our country; for willingness among us to examine our own violent ways and to practice kindness, speak with compassion and contribute to making peace each day, we pray,
- For those who have died this past week, and for the intentions of all gathered here, we pray,

**Presider** God of justice, hear our prayers and help us each day to live a life of faith and trust to which we have been called. We ask this in the name of Jesus your Son, Amen.

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