

The Thirty-second Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 17:10-16
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, my soul!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 9:24-28
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 12:38-44

The Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues our journey through Mark's gospel by looking at one last episode at the end of Mark 12. It is a pretty well-known story that is sometimes called the widow's mite, or as I put it, the widow's two cents. So we're going to look at this story of the widow in Mark 12:38-44:

And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go about in long robes, and to have salutations in the market places and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." And he sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came, and put in two copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him, and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so let's pause there. Before we get to the widow it is important to notice that there are two parts to the gospel reading today: the story of the widow's mite, but before that there's the warning against the scribes, or against being like the scribes. So I want to look at that for just a minute. So I've mentioned this before in other videos, the Greek word for scribe is *grammateus*. You can kind of hear the word grammar in their or grammarian; it was a person who would study the *grámma*, letters. So it was a person who was lettered, in other words, who had been trained to read and to write, most notably in the sacred language of Hebrew itself. So as I've said elsewhere, the scribe was effectively the First Century equivalent of a biblical scholar.

So I think it's kind of funny here that Jesus says basically be aware of the biblical scholars, alright. So, why beware of them? Well he says look at what they're like. They like to go about in long robes. Can you imagine doctoral robes or something like that? They like to have greetings said to them in the marketplaces, and by salutations it means like a formal greeting with a certain title like Prof. or Dr. or something like that. They like to have the best seats in the synagogue, so it'd be like if me and my family maybe sat on the first row. Alright, I don't like this passage anymore. No, I'm just kidding, but we do sit on the front row, it's just so the kids can see the mass clearly though, it's not like we have our name on it or anything. They like places of honor at feasts, right, so they get the chair at the front, they get the special speakers table with the elite members of the fundraiser. Phew, at least the last one doesn't apply, and he says they like to devour widow's houses and for pretense make long prayers.

So what does that mean? Well these scribes would prey upon widows who would often be left with land or an inheritance or with money. So rich widows to this day can sometimes be the objects of people trying to get money out of them, right. So in Jesus' day, the First Century, a lot of these scribes, a lot of these professional scholars who need people to fund their work would prey on the elderly and prey on the widows. And it says they devour widow's houses, in other words, they basically take them for all that they have, and they make long prayers for a pretense. So what he's saying there is they pray publicly at length not because they love God but in order to show their piety to everyone, to show forth publicly how devout and how learned they are as well, okay. What does Jesus say about these biblical scholars? They will receive the greater condemnation. So what he's doing here is he's

taking basically some of the most wealthy and elite members of Jewish society, who back then actually, unlike in our society where we idolize musicians or sports stars, athletes and that kind of thing, because that's what we value, we value entertainment. In First Century Judaism, because they valued the *Torah*, they valued the law, they valued worship, they valued their religion, then the scribe, believe it or not, scholars, were highly revered figures within Jewish society, right. They were among the elite, they were revered. I was going to say they weren't the under paid lackeys of state university, but I'll leave that part out, it was just a different cultural context. So Jesus is taking the highest member of society, in a sense, the scribe and now he's going to contrast it with one of the lowest members of society, or the most vulnerable member of society, namely a widow who has nothing to her name.

So first he speaks about the scribe and then he contrasts this...it says he sat down opposite the treasury and he watched the multitude putting money into the treasury. Alright, so let me pause here and kind of paint a picture for you because it might not be clear to us what he means by the treasury. We think in the United States, treasury, we think of a bank or something that. No, no, no, what he's talking about here is an actual place in the Temple where you would deposit alms, right, before you would enter into the Temple. You might think of the poor boxes on your way into a parish or something like that. There might be a place where you can put your tithe or you can make an offering for the poor in your parish. That's similar to what they had in the Temple, although it was a little more elaborate and pretty public. So in this case, it's really helpful, the *Mishnah* is a collection of ancient Jewish traditions that the rabbis of the First, Second, and Third centuries put together, and a lot of them are about what the Temple was like before it was destroyed. So in one of the *Mishnah* tractates called *Shekalim*, it's all about the shekel, which was the coin that you would use to make an offering of alms either to the poor or to the Temple. So they have regulations about that. In the *Mishnah* it actually describes what this treasury was like, so let me read to you from that:

There were thirteen Shofar-chests in the Temple...

Pause there, the Shofar-chests were basically...they were like...a shofar is a horn. So it was like a funnel into which you could put your coins that would go into different kinds of offerings. So on these different Shofar-chests:

...whereon were inscribed: 'New Shekel dues', 'Old Shekel dues', 'Bird-offerings', 'Young birds for the Whole- Offering', 'Wood', 'Frankincense', 'Gold for the Mercy-Seat', and, on six of them, 'Freewill-offerings'.²

That's in *Mishnah Shekalim* 6:5. So notice what it's saying. In the Temple there was the treasury that had these different chests with different funnels leading into them. So if you wanted to make a monetary offering of your annual tithe, that was the shekel due, let's say you missed last year, you'd put it in the old shekel due. If it was for this year, you'd put it in the new shekel due. If you wanted to have a bird, a dove, turtledove offered on your behalf, a small sacrifice, you'd put the coin into the bird offering and you could be sure that the priest was going to take a bird on your behalf and sacrifice it for you. Young birds for the whole offering. If you wanted to contribute to the frankincense being burned in the holy place, well you put your coin in that funnel. If you wanted to contribute to gold for the Temple, there's another one. Then finally, there were free will offerings, which is just a voluntary offering out of love of God just wanting to offer it to him. So it's kind of interesting there that what Jesus is doing is he is sitting down opposite this Temple treasury where, according to the *Mishnah*, you had these different chests that people put their money into and he's watching the people put in their offerings, okay. You can kind of imagine people putting money in the candle boxes at church, right. You have the little slot you put your money in and then you light a candle for some particular prayer intention. So Jesus is watching these people. The rich people come in, they're putting in large sums, but there's this widow who comes and she puts in two copper coins that amount to a penny.

Okay, so how much money is this? The Greek word here *leptos* is basically the smallest possible coin, it's about 1/128th of a denarius. So a denarius is a day's wage, a copper coin, this *leptos*, is 1/128th of that daily wage. It's a real small amount, very small amount. So she has two of these copper coins which, Mark tells us, together make a *quadrans*. He actually uses a Greek word here that's a form of the Latin word for a fourth. It's another kind of example that Mark, maybe a clue, that Mark's writing for a Roman audience. So they're not familiar with the Greek

² Mishnah, *Shekalim*, 6:5; trans. H. Danby

leptos, so he translates it over into Roman coinage as about a *quadrans*, or as your English translation says, which make a penny. So again he's just trying to give one of the smallest coin values that they would know in the Roman Empire. So she takes those two pennies, or those two copper coins that make a *quadrans*, and she puts it in.

Jesus then uses her as an example. He calls his disciples and he says, "Truly, I say to you, this widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty put in everything she had, her whole living." Alright, so what's going on here? Well, what is Jesus saying? Basically this is this widow's last two coins, this is all she has. She's put in the last of her money. What has she chosen to do with the last of her money? She's chosen to make an offering to God, right, and to the Temple. Now does the Temple need her two last coins? Does the Temple need her *quadrans*, her penny? No, the Temple was covered in gold, they had lots of priests, it was extremely wealthy. It was basically the economic center of Jerusalem. Think about this, in the First Century A.D. you didn't have banks, so where the treasury was at was kind of the economic center of the city. So it was the cultic center, sacrificial center, religious center, but also the economy was revolved around the Temple. So it has all the money it could possibly need, but this woman takes her money and she makes an offering to God. Now was it a whole burnt offering? Was it money for some gold for the Temple? Was it money for a free will offering? We don't know. Was she paying her tithe for the year? We don't know, but what we do know is that it's all that she had. Jesus takes that moment and he uses it to teach the apostles that although the rich people are putting quantitatively more money than she did, she qualitatively far exceeded them with her donation because she gave all that she had. She gave the last of her living to God and to his sacrifices and to the Temple.

So it's a beautiful passage, a really powerful passage contrasting the wealth and prestige and esteem and external desires to be praised of the scribes with the interior charity, generosity, and love for God of this poor widow, who, by the way, in a First Century society, if she's a widow who is totally on her own, she could through this act basically put herself into utter destitution and utter poverty. She may or may not have family to even care for her at this point, and that seems to be the case if this is all that she has. So Jesus, in other words, is trying to teach us, trying to

teach the disciples, about what offerings to God, what a true offering to God is. It's the one where we give everything. If you think of the previous Sunday's readings, right, to love the Lord your God with all your soul means to love him with your whole life, without remainder, leaving nothing over, holding nothing back.

Okay, so that's the Gospel reading for today. If we flip back to the Old Testament, the church has chosen to give us a story of another poor widow as background, and this is from the Book of Kings, 1 Kings 17:10-16. So in 1 Kings 17:10-16 we have a famous story of the prophet Elijah and the poor widow. I love this story, it's a fascinating, fascinating story. So let's go and look at [1 Kings] 17:10-16, it says this:

So he arose and went to Zar'ephath; and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." And Eli'jah said to her, "Fear not; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, `The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" And she went and did as Eli'jah said; and she, and he, and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD which he spoke by Eli'jah.

So many elements of this story are really fascinating. First of all, notice the first line of Elijah, bring me a little water to drink. That should make you think of someone else. I know we're not in John's Gospel right now, we're studying Mark, but it should make you think of Jesus in the Gospel of John where he says to the Samaritan woman give me a drink, right. So you have this invitation to provide for the holy man, to provide for the man of God, to show hospitality to him. And so the woman responds by saying, look I have nothing baked, I only have a handful of meal in a jar, a little oil, and now I'm gathering sticks so I can go make our last

meal basically. So they're about to eat their last meal. Now what I love about this is that Elijah says don't be afraid but first feed me, right. So I know you're about to die, I know your son's about to die, but I really am hungry right now so go make the bread and go get me some water and I'll provide for you. Now on the one hand, this just seems like the most insensitive thing anyone in the Old Testament does. I mean this is pretty insensitive when you come down to it, but when you kind of step back for just a second, this isn't just an example of Elijah here being completely inconsiderate of this widow and her son, what he's doing is he's testing her faith, he's testing her faith. We'll see Jesus do similar things in the Gospels, right. Like when he says to the Syrophenician woman, right, it's not right to take the children's food and give it to the dogs. It seems completely insensitive, lack of understanding, lack of feeling, I mean it's almost rude for him to treat her that way. But what he's really doing is laying a kind of challenge before her; he's putting her faith to the test.

That's really what's going on in this story, it's a test of her faith. Is she going to be afraid that God can't provide, or will she trust that even if she gives her last meal to the prophet that God through his prophet will care for her family. And Elijah says don't be afraid, feed me first and then afterward make for yourself and for your son, because the jar of meal is not going to run out and the cruse of oil is not to fail until the day that the Lord brings rain on the Earth. What does that mean? At this time there was a drought, that's why famine has affected her and her son, so that's why they're about to die. And what Elijah is saying is I'm going to take care of you, the Lord I should say will take care of you through me, during this time of famine and drought. Just believe, trust, and bring me a meal first.

Okay, so effectively what he's asking her to do is give a kind of tithe. So in the Old Testament you will frequently see God tell his people to take the first-fruits of your land, 1/10 of them, and offer them to me, offer them to the Temple, offer them to the Levites, the Priestly tribe, and then take the rest for yourself. Now in an agricultural society that is a real act of faith because you don't know whether you're going to get a second harvest; you don't know whether the grain is going to produce more. It all might be wiped out in three weeks by a storm, you don't know. So to take that tithe off the top of your produce is an act of faith. It not only is putting God first, it also is implicitly saying I trust you to provide for the rest. I trust you to provide for my family. The modern equivalent would be writing a check to your

church at the end of the month after you've spent your check, and paid all your bills, and taken care of your groceries, and had all your entertainment needs met, whatever, and then you give God whatever is left over. Well that might show some love for God but it certainly doesn't show any faith in God, because you're taking care of yourself first and then taking care of God last. What God does in the Old Testament is he says no, no, no, give me the tithe off the top. I want the 10% from your check at the beginning of the month, to use a modern analogy, or a tenth part of your harvest at the beginning of the crop and then I'll provide for you for the rest. So this is a very radical image of the tithe being described here in this encounter between Elijah and the widow. And of course what happens? Her meal, the ground flour for making bread, doesn't run out and her jar of oil doesn't run out. So she has enough to provide for her family. It's a miracle of multiplication.

So this isn't the last time we'll see multiplication miracles in the Old Testament. There will be multiplication of bread under the prophet Elisha, you've got the multiplication of the oil and bread under Elijah, and then of course when you get to the New Testament Jesus is going to multiply the loaves and the fishes. And all of these miracles of multiplication are really meant to show us the truth that God is omnipotent, he's all-powerful, and that he has the power to provide for us even in the most dire situation, even in the most desperate situations like this widow in the Old Testament, or like the widow with her two copper coins in the New Testament who's at the end of her rope financially, so speak. So that's really the message of this week is to trust in the Lord, to give alms, not just to the poor but to God, to care for the Temple, to provide for the Temple, trusting that he will provide for us as well. And I have to say, just on a personal level, the practice of tithing is something that really does put your faith to the test. I know from personal experience and also in the lives of other Christians that I've met who take that initiative to give God the first-fruits of their income, he really does bless that and you see the fruits of that kind of spirituality in all kinds of ways in our lives. Because let's face it, wherever we put our money is going to reveal where our priorities are and what we consider to be of value. So to take our money and give it to the Lord, to give it to the church, to make offerings of it to God and to the poor, is a way of conforming our will, interior will, and our actions to the love of God and the love of neighbor. Kind of like we saw last week, it's nice for Jesus to say love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as

yourself, but what does that love look like in action? A large part of it is almsgiving. Giving alms to God and giving alms to our neighbor.

Also too, I might point out, I didn't bring this up from the living tradition, but you'll see typologically on the spiritual level of this text, what might bread and oil point to? Those are both sacramental images. Think about it. In the new covenant we receive the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is made from ground meal, it's made from flour, right. So what is the ultimate offering of flour that never runs out? It's the Eucharist, which has been offered since the Last Supper and which will be offered until the end of time, and we're never going to run out of it. What about the oil? Well think about the chrism mass and the sacred oils that are used in the rights of baptism, confirmation, holy orders, anointing of the sick, right. All of those oils flow from the passion of Christ, they flow from the offering of Jesus on Calvary and we're never going to run out of them. The sacramental oil that brings us healing, that brings us life, that brings us the priesthood, that conforms us to Christ in baptism and confirmation, those oils, in a sense, are superabundant; they're constantly being renewed in the church every year at the chrism mass and then every time a priest or bishop anoints one of the faithful with those sacred oils. So you kind of see here a prophetic prefiguration of the unending abundance of the sacramental life of the church. So just as Elijah gives natural life to the widow with the unceasing oil and bread of the Old Testament, so now Christ gives supernatural life to the church, his bride, with the unending and unceasing bread of the Eucharist and the oil of the sacraments. So we don't need to be afraid of losing that. He will provide for us.

Finally, the living tradition. I'd like to end with a quote from St. John Chrysostom, golden mouth, Fourth Century Bishop of Constantinople, one of my favorite church fathers. He has this to say about the widow's offering, just keep this in mind:

“When the widow put into the collection box only two small coins, the master did not give her a recompense worth only two coins. Why was that? Because he paid not attention to the amount of the money. What he did heed was the wealth of her soul. If you calculate by the value of her money, her

poverty is great. If you bring her intention into the light, you will see that her store of generosity defies description.”³

So what's he saying there? That although economically she's destitute, spiritually she's the richest person around. Her generosity is generally incomprehensible because she's giving everything she has to God.

³ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, 6.12