

Homilies for the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time:

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Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle B

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: 1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Two images come to mind when I listen to the beautiful hymn, “Let Us Break Bread Together.” They are very real to us as Christian believers. One of the images is of kneeling; the other is that of being given bread to eat. The gesture of kneeling has always been a posture that implies we are in submission to a power greater than ourselves, that we give ourselves over to something greater than ourselves. What I’d like to ask you to imagine with me for a few moments is that the gesture of kneeling has everything to do with being in awe, being in submission, trusting in some figure greater than ourselves. That very act of giving ourselves over to someone’s care is a very nurturing, very enriching and healthy experience. It feeds us; it feeds our souls. One of the things we learn from the Judeo-Christian Scriptures is that we are a people who are constantly called to open ourselves to a power greater than ourselves that we trust in. When we trust in that power guiding us, caring for us, nurturing us — there is health and there is freedom. That is what we prayed for in the opening prayer: Give me real freedom, give me wholeness of body. It’s very healthy for us to be in a disposition of being dependent on some greater power, particularly when we see who that power truly is. It is a power that cares, a power on our side. It is a power that is pure love.

What I sense as we share in this work together, our spiritual lives — is that words, as important and necessary as they are — are not the real agents of transformation. The real agent of transformation is experience. We’ve got to experience God. We’ve got to experience relationships. We have to experience ourselves. It’s so ironic to me that if we get into a too tightly structured moral system it’s almost as if it shrivels our experience — especially if we become so afraid of making a mistake. It leaves us flat, dry, and empty. Hungry. I’d like to ask you to imagine with me that the opposite is really true when we listen to the gospel. The gospel is encouraging us into life, into relationships, into understanding an experience of what it means to be human. Why else would there be such a strong emphasis on this whole notion that God is quick to forgive all of our mistakes? And that if we live a way of life that is afraid of mistakes, afraid of missing the mark, then I don’t think we can really enter into life. If there is one clear aspect to the teaching of Jesus, it is that we believe in a God who encourages us to enter into the world, into life, and who is absolutely quick to make exceptions for those mistakes. To give forgiveness and love to those who are struggling. Let’s look at the first reading from the Book of Kings. It’s a wonderful story about someone who is invited to trust, and who is going through a very real experience that demands trust. First, a little context about this passage from 1 Kings. We see that the prophet Elijah has been told by God to go and stay with the

widow of Zarephath. A little background: There is a god, a false god named Baal who was being worshiped by many people. This was the god of fertility. The irony is that this god really wasn't creating a fertile, rich world for people. It was a false god; this god could not produce what was promised. The prophet is involved in trying to reveal to the people who the true God is. Basically, what Elijah announces is that one day there is going to be a great famine in the world, a great drought, and that until God tells the prophet it is going to end, it is not going to end. This is a clear statement that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is in charge. He is going to show that he is in charge. He will announce the end of this great famine. He enters into the personal world of someone who is struggling with this famine. He finds the widow, who has a son, and they are at the end of their hope. She is preparing the last meal they feel they will have. She is gathering sticks so that she can make a little fire. She is going to make a little bread. Then she and her son are going to die. She is basically hopeless as far as being able to be nurtured and sustained in this environment she finds herself in.

Along comes the prophet Elijah. He does the most extraordinary thing. He asks her, as she is making this last meal for herself and for her son, "Would you make something for me first?" I just think this is extraordinary. You have your last meal. Perhaps you only have enough for the two of you. "But would you be able to give me first the last little bit that you have, and then take the little that is left and take it for yourself?" For whatever reason, it doesn't say why, she says, "Okay, I will do that." Maybe it was because she really believed the words the prophet was saying to her, and the words are: "Don't be afraid." Maybe all of a sudden she had the sense that the prophet knew something she didn't know. Maybe she knew she would be cared for. She trusted. The most interesting thing happens when she does this. There is a prophecy that comes from Elijah: "God is going to take care of you. That's the bottom line: You are going to be sustained and nurtured. What's going to happen is that little jar of flour that you have and that little vessel of oil — they are never going to run dry. You will be able to eat on those." Of course, it happens. But isn't it interesting the way it happens? The way I would like God to come into my life and take away my anxiety about whether I am enough or whether I am going to have enough is for him to have sent fifteen 27-gallon barrels of oil and 27 sacks of flour, and put it in a nice, safe place where nobody can steal it. I can imagine God putting his hands around this widow and saying, "Now look. Don't you worry. There's enough food in there for a year." But God doesn't. He just says, "Trust me." And every time we go and take that next handful from the little jar of flour or pour a little oil out, God says, "Just trust me. When you go to pour it out again, there is going to be enough." We are sustained in the present moment. What does the widow need to bring her peace and happiness other than radical trust that there is always going to be enough?

What is interesting about the story is that as she moves on, she doesn't really trust enough. Later on, in this passage, the widow's son gets sick and he dies. She is really upset. She is a widow, and she has no one else except for her son. She turns to the prophet and asks, "What is this. Is this punishment for my sins?" Right away, she is filled with shame and guilt that she did something wrong, that this should happen to her son. She asks Elijah: "What's the deal. I thought I could trust in you, and now my son is dead." Elijah takes her son to an upper room and performs a healing miracle and brings the son back to the widow. She is absolutely beyond herself with joy. Isn't it interesting that she had learned to trust in these little things "where there is always enough food," and then comes the bigger test, the harder test. Could she trust that this God, Yahweh, could not only sustain her with food but also could return that which is most precious to her if she let go of it? If she was asked to let go of it? It's a wonderful story that tells us there is a very real task on

our plates that has to do with trust — radical, deep trust. It's interesting to me that even though the widow didn't trust that her son could come back to life (which is understandable, that was such an extraordinary thing) she immediately fell back into shame and guilt. The prophet didn't give in. He didn't give up his trust and beg God to do what he knew God would do for him. Let's take the widow in the Book of Kings and compare her to the woman in the gospel story from Mark. In the gospel passage, we have a comparison of two people. One is a person who is basically taking. The people in charge of the religious system, the scribes, would go around with marks of respect, always commanding respect from people. They were actually in charge of settling situations with widows and their money and home situations. They were always cutting a little bit out for themselves, so they were really devouring the savings of widows. We have the figure of a person who is taking.

The reason a person takes in this world is because they fear if they don't take something, there is not going to be anything there for them. It's a radical loss of trust. If we don't believe someone is in charge who is going to take care of us, we better be taking care of ourselves. If we don't believe someone is going to sustain us in each moment, then we better make sure we have enough stored away. We have that experience of people taking and making sure things are safe and secure. Then, this strange, wonderful figure comes in. She is a widow. She walks over to the treasury. Now at this time there was a common practice of people making donations to the temple. She puts in the smallest coins that were then available, close to a penny for us. She puts them in, but she has nothing else. That action is an action of radical trust. It is the same image we find in the Old Testament of the woman who reaches into the jar and always finds something to sustain her. How does this woman get this? Why is she so different from the scribes and Pharisees? Well, one thing we need to look at in our whole Christian tradition is that when we see virtues being asked of us we have to realize that these are gifts we are then expected to receive from God. We are not challenged to create this virtuous life ourselves. We are to receive it. We are to recognize that we need it. To know our longings and to be able to take that longing and say, "I know this longing can and will be sustained and fulfilled by a God who loves me."

In the reading from Hebrews, we have an image of Christ who is the ongoing sacrifice for all of our shortcomings and weaknesses. If we are to understand how that whole system worked in the Old Testament, if you were in debt to God because of your sins, you couldn't really ask him to give you something before you produced something for him. The New Testament turns this way of thinking completely around. This was the idea of "there is no debt," so you can now generously receive things from God. The image in the book of Hebrews is that there is this God-man who is constantly in the disposition of working for us. It doesn't mean that he continues to die over and over again and to suffer over and over again. Somehow, that action in and of itself was enough to reveal the disposition of God who is really willing to do anything for us. It creates in us a way of imagining a God who is constantly (if you want this image!) pacing back and forth in his palatial place in heaven worried about whether we have enough. And making sure we do. The danger is that we are running around in circles, turning to a false god such as Baal, turning to other things that we think will give us that security. The strangest thing to me about material things is that there is always a certain joy and peace when we receive them. We say, "Oh now that I have this, I will be better." All of a sudden, we realize it's not enough. We think we really need some more. Or: "I'd like some more." It says something about the human soul and what it longs for. It doesn't long for things that are transitory to try to fill us up. Or things that aren't really that stable. What the soul longs for is a

conviction, a trust, in a God who is totally in charge and capable of doing anything — and recognizing that in this God there is a commitment to us personally that says, “I will always take care of you. You are in my hands. I’ve got everything in my hands, and I am taking care of all of it.” We need that experience of radical trust. I don’t know what we can do to put ourselves in that experience, but that is what I think the gospel invites us to participate in: To find ourselves in the position where the only thing we can really trust in is the loving hands of God wrapped around us.

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Out of Her Poverty

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Today's first and third readings are deceptively simple. We are confronted with two nice ladies, two pious Jewish widows. Each is dreadfully poor, yet each gives all she has to a godly cause. One gives from her last handful of meal, her last drops of oil, to a prophet; the other puts her last two copper coins in the temple collection. One profits from a miracle; the other is praised by the Lord. Isn't that ever so touching? The moral? Why, give generously to your priest or rabbi, keep him in the style to which he would like to become accustomed, load the collection basket with all your greenery, and you can expect a miraculous hundredfold—or at least a pat on the back from the Master.

That is the surface story. Beneath the surface all sorts of kettles are boiling. As so often in the readings, so here, a basic Christian reality is at stake. Let me develop this in three stages: (1) the widows, (2) Jesus, (3) you and me.

I

First, the widows. You cannot simply read the seven verses from Mark in isolation. They are part and parcel of a larger drama. Around this snippet in Mark you find some startling contrasts: on the one hand, impressive appearances with little substance; on the other, stark simplicity with hidden depths. There is a fig tree in leaf, attractive to look upon from a distance; but when Jesus "went to see if he could find anything on it...he found nothing but leaves"; and he cursed it (Mk 12:13, 21). There is the temple, striking the disciples with wonder: "Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" And Jesus' reply: "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" (Mk 13:1—2). And in our passage, note the contrast. On the one hand, the scribes in their trendy outfits, with their reserved seats in church, on the dais at big dinners, praying endlessly. It's all a fake, Jesus says, a pretense. These are the same people who "eat up widows' houses," that is, gobble them up illegally (Mk 12:38—40). How different from the poor widow: no pomp or parade, no show or display; just a small gift to the Lord. No big deal.

Surface show versus inner substance. But there is more: the gift itself. "Many rich people put in large sums"; the "poor widow...put in two copper coins" (vv. 41—42). She put in the smallest Greek coin in circulation; you would need 128 of these to make up the daily wage of which Jesus speaks in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (cf. Mt 20:2). And still Jesus can tell his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more

than all" the rest. Why? Because they were tossing into the treasury "out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (vv. 43—44).

Be careful here. Jesus is not castigating the wealthy parishioners; he is not even accusing them of outward show. He is praising the widow. And his praise tells us something rich about human living, about the risk in giving. The widow's gift was greater than all because in giving the coins she gave up her security; she "put in her whole living." The others gave, and it was good; but they could leave the temple without anxiety, without indigestion. They had given a good deal, but there was more where that came from. For the widow, nothing left but to cast all her cares on God. Nothing left but to pray with the Psalmist:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.
Whence does my help come?
My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
(Ps 121:1—2)

Similarly for the widow in 1 Kings. A handful of meal and a spot of oil—enough to bake a cake for herself and her son before they lie down to die. And a stranger says: "First make *me* a little cake..." (1 Kgs 17:13)! Not that she was giving up her security; she had none, even if Elijah had not dropped in on her. But to give the last cake of your life to a stranger because he says "Don't be afraid"? What would you have answered? "Man, get lost"?

II

Second, Jesus. You see, Jesus enters into Mark's story of the widow not only as a commentator like Walter Cronkite, not only as a supreme judge like Warren Burger. This section of Mark is leading up to Jesus' passion and death. Here the reading from Hebrews is highly pertinent: Christ came "once for all...to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). What made the widow's gift superbly human was that she gave everything she had: her last two coins. What made it splendidly religious was that it resembled what Jesus himself would offer on the cross: himself.

In Jesus' offering there was a terrible risk. We tend to think of him as going through an act. After all, wasn't he God as well as man? Didn't he know he would rise again? You can make a very good case for all of that. But even so you are faced with an undeniable fact: Jesus was afraid to die. So afraid that he sweated blood; so fearful that he begged his Father to let him live; so terrified that his Father sent an angel from heaven to strengthen him. All human security was gone: his mother, his disciples, his wealthy friends; none of them could help. He was alone, face to face with the awful blackness, the awesome blankness, of death.

It's a bloody moment on the cross when this Jesus gives up literally everything to the Father for us; when a naked Jesus, with no security against death, prays to the Father in the words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46; Ps 22:1). But recall what Psalm 22 is all about. It is ultimately a prayer of trust, not in man or woman but in God:

In you our fathers trusted;

they trusted, and you delivered them.
To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not disappointed.
(Ps 22:4—5)

Like the widow, Jesus gave all he had. More obviously than the widow, Jesus gave all he was. Nothing left to give, he gave himself: "This is my body, which is given for you" (Lk 22:19). Out of his poverty, he put in the treasury of the Father everything he had, his whole living, his whole dying. No security...total risk...trust in God alone. The result? Simply, redemption. You and I, the whole of humanity from Adam to the last of human flesh, all of us have our sins put away, all of us can bend the knee before God and say with confidence "Our Father."

III

But how do you and I fit into this liturgy of two widows? At bottom, the widows symbolize the Christlife, where the key words are "gift" and "risk." If Jesus is the perfect human, the prototype of what a Christian should be, then our lives are Christian in the measure that they are shaped to his risk-laden self-giving.

Let me make an uncommonly frank confession. When I look at myself, I find that in my giving I am very much part of an American syndrome. We have a long tradition of giving—giving out of our surplus. Surplus cheese for the hungry, surplus clothes for Goodwill, surplus books for the missions, surplus money for United Way, surplus time for friends, a surplus cup of cold water. A good thing, mind you; I am not talking it down. Without it, life would be a jungle, survival of the fittest, "dog eat dog."

Good indeed, this giving out of our surplus; but it raises a problem for Christians. Could not our Lord at once applaud this and still ask: Do not the pagans do as much (cf. Mt 5:46—47)? Not for love of Christ, but surely no less than *what* we give. Where, then, is our Christianness? Only in a different motivation, only because we give in the name of Christ?

The story of the widow, and even more the deed of Christ, suggest strongly that the new thing he brought into the world is summed up in his phrase "out of her poverty" (Mk 12:44). I mean, we are most Christian, because most Christlike, when our giving affects our existence, when it threatens our security, when it is ultimately ourselves we are giving away. How could it be otherwise? Like it or not, it is the *crucified* Christ who is the supreme pattern, the paradigm, the model for Christian living, for Christian giving. And the crucified Christ gives...himself.

I dare not suggest how or where or when this touches any given one of you. Christ speaks to you not in a xeroxed letter, impersonal, addressed to "all Christians everywhere." He speaks to you where you're at. You—and he—know who you are, where your gifts lie, what restrains you from risking, why you keep giving out of your surplus. Christ alone can tell you at what point, and in what way, you have to surrender what lends you security, go out to your brothers and sisters with trust only in the power of a loving God.

Christ alone...Aye, there's the rub. Has Jesus Christ really gotten under my skin? How dearly do I love him? Isn't it appalling how little he moves most of us, how rarely he excites us? We watch *E.T.* and we go bonkers. A lovably strange character comes to earth

from somewhere out there, shares awhile our human joys and griefs, dies and is resurrected, returns to wherever he came from—and we cannot forget him (or her, or it). E.T. dominates our Halloween, reshapes our pumpkins, may well displace old Santa. But the God-man who really came to our earth, really died and rose again, really returned to his Father "now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:24), why doesn't he turn more of us on? Perhaps he will...if we take that little fellow from outer space seriously.

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