

32nd Sunday B 2018

My mother was a widow for thirteen years. She never got used to it. She missed my father greatly. She didn't like living alone, sleeping alone, or making decisions on her own. At the end of her life she looked forward to being with her husband in heaven.

One does not choose to become a widow. Being a widow in every time and place is difficult. In the days of the prophet Elijah and in the days of Jesus being a widow was not only difficult but life threatening. Women had no legal status or rights. They depended totally upon their husbands for everything. When a husband died, his widow would find herself in a very sorry state. Hopefully she had a son or a brother who would take care of her and her children. Many poor widows found themselves abandoned and homeless. That is why in both the old and new testaments we often read of the need to care for the widows and the orphans.

Two of our scripture readings today speak of a widow, the widow of Zeraphath, who had an encounter with the prophet Elijah and the widow in the gospel whom Jesus observed putting two coins in the treasury. Both widows are praised and held up as examples to follow.

What can we learn from them? Here are three lessons we can learn.

First, they teach us to be generous. Both women were very poor. The widow of Zeraphath, we are told, had just enough food for one more meal. She told the prophet that after she and her son ate this last meal they would die. The second widow, Jesus tells us, gave all she had left, two small coins. Here are two women who are basically destitute and yet they generously contribute all that they had. Their generosity is astounding. Some may have criticized them for being so generous when they were so poor. But all these centuries later, these two

women are examples to us of sacrificial giving. On the other hand, the scribes and priests in the gospel are condemned by Jesus for stealing money from the widows and for using religion for their own benefit.

The second lesson these widows teach us is to have complete faith and trust in God. What gave them the ability to be so generous? It has to be their trust and faith in God. They believed that God would take care of them. The widow of Zeraphath trusted in the words of the prophet Elijah. The widow in the gospel was obviously in the temple to pray. She had a relationship with God. She trusted God. So much so that she gave all that she had left. We are called to have a similar faith and trust in God. We believe in a God who can be trusted. We all know that trusting in God does not come easy, especially when we are facing difficult situations like illness, financial trouble, relationships that are falling apart, etc. These two widows give us an example of the importance of trust in God. We don't know what ever happened to these ladies but they show us that it is possible to trust God during the crisis in our lives.

The third lesson these widows teach us is one of courage. Despite the fact that these women had no legal or social standing in society, despite the fact that they were looked down upon, they were courageous and strong women. The widow in the first reading had a son she needed to take care of during a time of famine. She did all she could to care for him. The widow in the temple went there to pray and ask God's help. Both chose to do what they could to help themselves. They did not give up.

These two widows teach us to be generous, to have trust in God, and to persevere through the difficulties of life with courage. Jesus had very strong words to say to the religious leaders of his day. He accused them of using religion for their own benefit and for stealing from

widows. Jesus was always on the side of the oppressed and the downtrodden, the little ones who had no power and no one to advocate for them. We are called to be defenders and protectors of the poor, the powerless, the marginalized, and those whom the world often rejects and abandons.

In our day, we don't have to worry too much about widows. Thank God. But we do need to advocate for many others, like refugees and immigrants fleeing in desperation from violence, danger, and poverty. While we have a right to protect our borders and to advocate for reasonable immigration and asylum policies, we also have an obligation to welcome the stranger and those seeking entrance into our country. We have an obligation to advocate for them. They are our brothers and sisters. They are human beings deserving of our respect for their human dignity. We cannot be like the scribes in the gospel today who recited long prayers in synagogue but mistreated widows and refused to help them. Rather, we are called to love them, care for them, provide for their welfare, and advocate for them. The widows in today's scriptures represent all people who are weak, powerless, and have no one to speak in their name. We must do what Jesus would do.