

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 32ND. SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

1 Kings: 17:10-16 Psalm 146 Hebrews 9: 24-28 Mark 12: 38-44

By *Jude Siciliano*, OP

Dear Preachers:

There is an option today to read the shorter version of the Gospel, verses 41-44. If you choose to do that and are going to focus on the story of the widow, some of the following reflections may be of help. But in leaving out the first part, about those who “go around in long robes....who enjoy public recognition and respect.... who devour the houses of widows,” you risk omitting an important context that occasions Jesus’ reference to the widow. In addition, I don’t like to choose shorter readings because they usually chop up and render a condensed “Reader’s Digest” version of a formerly powerful narrative. It’s not just the “facts,” but also the details and flavor of a reading that communicate the message.

The setting for today’s Gospel is the temple, where Jesus has gone directly after his triumphant entry in Jerusalem. In the temple area he has a series of exchanges with the temple authorities. (11:1-12:44). (It would be good to read through this section to get the context for today’s passage.) Except for last week’s friendly exchange with the scribe (12: 28-34), Jesus is confronted in this section by the priests, scribes, and elders who challenge him in the summary question, “On what authority are you doing such things?” (11: 28). This section shows Jesus silencing his adversaries and exhibiting his authority. He belongs to the heritage of the prophets who also spoke out against false piety and the corrupt practices of religious people who abused their privileges and took from the poor for their own benefit. Their religious ranking was an occasion to receive respect and also put them in a position to profit from their standing in the community.

In the fuller version of today’s Gospel (12; 38-44), there are two mentions of widows: first there are widows whose houses are devoured by the scribes (possibly because the scribes were given a kind of executive care of the resources of widows and therefore were stealing from these same resources). Then there is the widow of the story, who gives two small coins into the treasury. Is it possible that the whole temple system is corrupt and the money going into the treasury is robbing people like this widow of their “whole livelihood”? Is Jesus attacking the very religious system that takes money from the poor and uses it to support people like the scribes who “go around in long robes”—indicating by their dress, that they are not part of the poor working peasants who constituted the vast majority of the

population? There is a sense of the “less significant” paying homage to the “more significant.” The long-robed-ones who receive places of honor are in a position to receive respect from the ordinary people but also have an opportunity to take advantage of those who show them respect. Those who could afford it least wound up paying these religious representatives for their prayers and services. So, the second part--- the widow’s offering--- concretizes the critique Jesus gives in the first part. Jesus is noticing the person whose house is being “devoured” for the sake of those who can live a leisurely and flamboyant life style.

This passage is sometimes used to encourage people to contribute to their church. In many denominations today is Stewardship Sunday. Two points here: the episode should give us religious leaders and teachers cause to reflect on the sincerity of our religious practice. Are the prayers we offer in public still the prayers of our heart’s earnest longing and celebration? Or have we said them so often that they are reduced to mere rote, the things we do out of routine to fulfill our roles? Are they prayers memorized, but not known “by heart”?

We also need to examine our consciences as church communities. Are we the good stewards of the funds we collect? Are they being used in ways that express the Gospel priorities the disciples of Jesus should have in the world? While we need to maintain our buildings in good order and beauty, are we excessive in what we spend to decorate the “temple” while taking funds from parts of the budget that could be used for other, more Gospel-oriented values? The image of the “long robes” of the scribes is one that can be applied to various aspects of our parish life. What is a “long robe,” an excess or a peripheral, and what is at the heart of our religious observance? We can fit very comfortably into the local scene, be a “respectable parish” with manicured lawns and tasteful liturgical practices and architecture but be lacking in the true prophetic discipleship to which Jesus calls us.

If we were to focus on just the widow’s tale in today’s Gospel, we could contrast the excessive show of the scribes with her religious zeal. Only God would notice how important her anonymous and seeming slight gift is. And Jesus voices what God has noticed—she has given everything. Jesus would take note her because, of all the religious figures he has met in the temple, she is the one with whom he could identify. Like her, he is soon to be asked to give his “whole livelihood,” he will be asked to make the total offering of his life to God. He too will hold nothing back from God. All life is a gift from God, and all life is offered back to God in

service.

There is a reckless quality in the widow's giving. Who among us wouldn't hesitate, if the donation we considered giving were from our very livelihood---would take all that we have? Our practicality might make us, in her place, consider our circumstances and put the money toward food to get us and our family through the day. We wouldn't be faulted for that. Jesus is not telling us to bankrupt ourselves and put all the money in the next collection (as much as that might make a pastor with a big mortgage very happy!). But he does call us to consider her, and she becomes a model of radical trust in God. Her stellar trust challenges our less-than-total commitment. She is highlighted for us, not because her monetary gift was significant, but because her gift indicates how much her life was turned to God. Her total self-giving reminds us how shallow is our own faith; how portioned out is our commitment to God; how distracted we are by material matters that pertain more to our abundance than to our real needs.

She reminds us that our real need is for God; that no matter how much we have, we do not have final ultimate security. The widow knew that in God alone was her security and future. She prepares us for next Sunday's Gospel which warns of the end of all the securities we think we have and reminds us that all that seems secure can be taken from us when, "sun will be darkened... and the powers of heaven will be shaken." (Mark 13: 24-32) When that happens, where we have placed our trust will determine how well we face the moment that unseats our securities and tests who we are.

QUOTABLE

Preaching has as its primary purpose reminding believers of God's mercy and justice and calling them to respond by living lives motivated by the Christ-life within them. When it stays close to biblical patterns of preaching--which is not the same thing as citing the Bible copiously--it can be most effective

Preaching has had a bad name in Christian circles almost from apostolic times. There are a number of reasons for this. The basic one is that God and the things of God are ineffable; therefore, when words about the divine are multiplied they attempt to do the impossible. More practically, preachers have numerous faults that can make the word of God unpalatable. They depart from the biblical word and deliver a merely human word; they do not sufficiently prepare what they mean

to say; they deal in cliches, thereby rendering their remarks predictable and otiose; they preach too long. The latter is not a chronological judgment so much as the perceived disproportion between the number of words spoken and the ideas expressed.

-----Gerard S. Sloyan in, THE COLLEGEVILLE PASTORAL DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY.

JUSTICE PREACHING: Interested in writing to someone on death row?

Inmates on death row are the most abandoned people in the prison system. Many, because of years of incarceration, have lost all contact with those on the outside. Here in North Carolina, we have gathered a list of people on death row who are looking for pen pals. (The effort is called, "Project Link.") The kind of people who read "First Impressions" would be excellent sources of information, inspiration and love for someone who has been abandoned by so many. If you would be interested in writing to someone on North Carolina's death row or would like information on how to start a similar project in your own state, contact: Jude Siciliano, O.P. Judeop@Juno.com 919-833-1893, Ext. 224.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

"Blessings on your preaching"

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org