

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The author Nelson Algren once told the story about an orphan and his widowed mother. The orphaned boy goes to a Catholic school. The priest tells him he needs five dollars to have a Mass said for his deceased father. If Masses are not said for him, the priest tells him, his father “will never see God in the face.”

The boy is very upset and goes home with tears in his eyes and tells his mother, “Dad will never see God in the face if we don’t have a Mass said.” Although the widow does not have much money, she gives her son the five dollars, and he gives it to the priest who says the Mass.

A little while later, the priest corners the boy again with the same message. His deceased father will never see God in the face unless there are more Masses said. The boy, very anxious now, begs his mother for another five dollars. “If we don’t do it, Dad will never see God in the face.” The widow, smelling something fishy going on, holds her ground. “Then he’ll just have to look at God’s fanny, then.”

The widow in today’s Gospel story could have used someone like that. It’s hard not to imagine that she was in the line to make a donation to the temple because someone had talked her into it. The modern-day widow of Algren’s story could see through the priest’s

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comment and determine who would really be the beneficiary of the five-dollar Mass stipend.

It's true, Jesus does give the widow in the Gospel credit for her devotion. She's willing to give all she has to live on for the sake of the temple. She acted in such an unselfish manner, and that's what Christians are called to do, right?

But at the beginning of this Gospel story Jesus also recognizes that people can be talked into things that don't really serve their good.

The temple in Jesus day was Herod the Great's great renovation project. He wanted to make it one of the seven wonders of the world, and had been working on it for 46 years. No expense was to be spared. And the members of the religious establishment bought into that vision, even if it meant talking poor widows into donating funds they couldn't afford to do without.

When Jesus sits opposite the temple treasury, it symbolizes that he is opposed to the whole temple atmosphere around money. This is not a problem for the scribes or the rich who can afford to give large sums, but it becomes a matter of life and death for the poor.

Jesus recognizes the failure of the system because someone should have been looking out for the widow. That's more important to

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Jesus that even the temple.

The great irony of this episode in the Gospel is that we know from history that the temple didn't last. As beautiful as it might have been—the descriptions of the temple include the detail that Herod had solid gold panels placed on the outside walls so that it would shimmer in the sun so brightly that one could not even stand to look at it—it was destroyed completely by the Romans within a generation.

The greed of the scribes and temple officials all went for nothing.

Jesus does acknowledge that there is a treasure that does last, but it doesn't have to do with buildings, even religious ones. It has to do with being concerned for the poor and lowly and reaching out to them.

In the first reading Elijah is on the run from an evil king and is in dire need—for water and for bread—the most basic of necessities. And the widow of Zaraphath, who is a Philistine, is willing to meet those needs as she is able. She shares her last meal with her son and this stranger and, true to the prophet's word, discovers that God is looking out for her.

Her willingness to believe in the promise and attend to the needs of the poor is rewarded with having her needs met, too.

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In this story there are no buildings involved, no gold of the temple, just ordinary people getting through to the next day, and having the experience that God is with them as they do so.

Of course, St. Ben's is a beautiful church, and we are grateful to be the ones who get to worship here week in and week out. And we know that we want to hand it on to the next generation in good condition.

But more important than that is handing on a tradition of being a people of faith, willing to do our part to see that the Good News is proclaimed, the needs of our neighbors are attended to, that people are not being exploited just to make others more comfortable.

And so we stand with Jesus when he stands up for the widow, and the orphan, and for anyone else who has been forgotten in the midst of great plans for things that will not last.