

Proper 27, Year B
Mark 12:38-44

This morning's Gospel reading made me nervous when I started working with it last week. Jesus said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces..." The other day I was in Vons, and as I walked down the aisle, one of the store employees called out, "Hi, Father, how are you doing?"

"Beware of the ones who like to have the best seats in the synagogues...Beware of the ones who for appearances like to say long prayers." Our daughter used to accuse me of making my prayers too long at the dinner table.

This reading was making me nervous. But then the news reminded me of all of the nonsense going on with the presidential campaign, and before long I was thinking, "No, no, no, I'm alright, Jesus was talking about those politicians. They're the ones he was warning us about. They're the ones we should watch out for." That was pretty cynical.

But then I remembered that this morning's Gospel reading had been paired with the reading from the First Book of the Kings, and bingo, I thought to myself, "It's the widows. We're supposed to be looking at the widows today." So, what about these two widows, one from the gospel reading, and one from First Kings? What can we learn from their stories?

First, let's look at the widow from Zarephath. The great prophet, Elijah, was engaged in a mighty battle with King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel. Jezebel had introduced her cult god into the land, and now there was a contest going on between Baal and Yahweh. Elijah said that neither rain nor dew would fall upon the land until Yahweh caused it to happen, and a great drought and famine struck the land. God told Elijah to go down east of the Jordan River, and he was fed by ravens there, and he drank from the wadi Cherith. But the wadi dried up, so God told Elijah to go to Zarephath where a widow would take care of him. That's

where we enter the story this morning. Elijah arrives at the gate of the town and he sees a widow gathering sticks for a fire. Elijah asks the widow to get him a drink of water, and the widow stops what she is doing to get the water. That tells us something. This was a woman, and this was a widow. That meant she had no status and no options. Of course she would comply with Elijah's request. But as she was going, Elijah asked for more. He wanted bread, too. The widow said, "There's not enough. I have only a handful of flour and a little oil. I was just getting ready to build a fire so I could bake a cake of bread, and my son and I were going to have one last meal and then die." But Elijah still wants bread. He says, "Do not be afraid. Bake the bread and share it with me. The flour and oil will not run out. God will provide." So the widow did as Elijah had asked, and the flour and the oil did not run out.

Now we go to the temple in Jerusalem — the focal point for all of Jewish life. Jesus had issued a warning about the religious elite, and then he had taken up a place by the temple treasury. Crowds were coming by and Jesus watched as rich people put big sums of money into the opening. And then a poor widow came by and dropped in two tiny coins — half a penny each. And Jesus spoke up: "This is a gift! The others gave thoughtlessly, carelessly, unconsciously, but this widow has given everything. She has given herself and her heart." What impact do you think the widow's gift had on temple life? Did it pay for administration, or buy candles or fix the roof? I don't think so. And we all know that even with the large, but thoughtless, contributions from the rich, it wasn't long before the temple in Jerusalem was reduced to rubble and dust. But 2,000 years later we're still telling the story of the widow's coins. Why do you suppose that is?

For the past seven Sundays fellow parishioners have been talking to us about gratitude, about why they're thankful for St. James and for the other blessings in their lives. As I have listened to these testimonials and thought about the subject of stewardship in general, there's a single word that has fixed itself in my mind. It's a word that has

everything to do with the widows we've heard about today. It's also a word that gets stuck in the American craw. The word is surrender.

We have to surrender — surrender to the notion that we are anything without God; surrender to the notion that we can do anything without God; surrender to the notion that we own anything outright; surrender to the notion that we have earned our beautiful houses and fancy cars and expensive clothes and jewelry.

The widows in today's stories knew about this kind of surrender. This kind of surrender was their most constant companion in life. And today you and I have learned that this surrender to God served these women well. For the widow of Zarephath it brought physical food and length of days. For the poor widow in the temple it won a liberated heart and spirit that were in perfect union with her God. God does not want what we have.

God wants us. God wants all of us. God wants our hearts. The widows in today's stories possessed nothing, but in their surrender they found abundance of life and peace.

Abundance of life and peace. I believe we all want abundant life and peace. Surrender is the way. Surrender is the only way.

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November 8, 2015
St. James by-the-Sea Episcopal Church
La Jolla, California