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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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November 6, 2021

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“This poor widow put in more than all the others” (Mark 12:44).

1 Kgs 17:10-16; Ps 146; Heb 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Women had no legal status or identity apart from family in Jesus’ time. If a woman lost her husband and had no son, she would be reduced to penury and dependence on charity to survive. “Widows and orphans” were designated among the poorest of the poor in Jewish society, and it was a religious duty to see to their welfare.

When Jesus raised the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17), he recognized that her loss had left vulnerable. There is added poignancy in the story because Jesus also knew that his death would render his own widowed mother destitute, which is why he provided for her from the cross by entrusting her to one of his disciples (John 19:26).

With this background, it is no surprise that Jesus’ attention is drawn to the poor widow in the temple. Amid the fanfare of wealthy donors and their heavy coins clattering into the brass treasury receptacles to the sound of trumpets, the poor widow was quietly surrendering herself entirely to God’s providence by giving “all she had to live on.” Her real offering, Jesus knew, was her vulnerability and trust, an act of worship the wealthy cannot give because they have never known the gnawing anxiety and uncertainty the poor live with every day of their lives. While the rich flout the security their money provides, the widow places herself in the hands of God. The widow has become rich in her poverty while the rich grow poorer by cushioning their lives from reality and the special dignity the poor have with one another in their mutual need.

In another encounter, a rich young man who might have been an Apostle goes away sad because he was dependent on his wealth rather than on God. (Mark 10:17). His sadness stalks the wealthy philanthropists who write off their surplus funds to buy shallow public approval. The scribes who prey on widows are roundly condemned, and the entire scene indicts religion for sale to assuage guilt and launder money made by exploitation and gaming the system.

Today’s Gospel is more than a pious lesson about being generous and trusting in God. There is indignation in Jesus’ voice that shames any society that worships

wealth while neglecting its widows and orphans, women denied equal pay for equal work, alien residents and undocumented immigrants who are paid under the table for feeding those who sit at the table, who do the dirty work at the ground level of every economy that supports others above them. It calls out government by the rich for the rich and public servants who serve themselves to stay in power. Like the scribes who devour the houses of widows while mouthing platitudes and prayers, they will be held accountable.

That God hears the cry of the poor should make us uneasy if our security is based on surplus wealth, if we are bogged down with too much stuff, more than we need when others have too little. If we are postponing our intention to lighten up, live more simply, then the Word is inviting us to find the freedom that comes from interdependence and community rather than doing our own thing, independence that all too easily becomes isolation from our neighbors and the Spirit waiting for us at the margins to show us the hopes, fears, anxieties and joys of the real world. This is the Good News: Freedom from fear, blessings everywhere, the cost of discipleship that enriches us.

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