

32nd Sunday 2015 1 Kings 17: 10-16; Mark 12:41-44

The readings give two very touching stories, remote from the comfort of our middle-class lives. Most of us don't live hand-to-mouth or on the street. But the person sitting next to us may live more on the edge than we think.

The widow of Zarephath provides for Elijah, who, outside her culture, is not her prophet. We would understand if she said, "I'm sorry, I can't help you; please go back to your own people; I hope someone there can help." It is what a sensible person, responsible for her starving young son, would do. But she gives in to Elijah's badgering and is miraculously rewarded for it. For one year the jar of flour does not go empty; the jug of oil does not go dry.

Flour and oil, body and blood, jar and jug: together these pairs represent the soul, the life-principle, the person, the true self. Even if we don't know poverty or hunger first-hand, we each know what emptiness feels like, or emotional drought--the depression, the discouragement. For most of us these states are not miraculously overcome. It is significant that the widow is not given a year's worth of flour and oil all at once. Too much flour and oil might turn, spoil, go buggy. She receives in the precarious terms of the Lord's prayer: give us *this day* our daily bread. No hoarding for advance needs, which is the mistake of the man building barns in the parable.

Jesus uses the widow of Zarephath to insult his audience when he begins his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue. He has just read the luminous words of the prophet Isaiah: The spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; to proclaim release to captives, sight to the blind; to liberate the oppressed. To declare a year of jubilee. He concludes, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

He then ruins it all by attacking the national pride of his listeners. Foreigners, not you, will get blessings. As did Naaman the Syrian leper, cured by Elisha and the Zarephath widow, fed by Elijah in return for her generosity. Antagonizing your listeners, strange rhetorical technique: I am not brave enough to try it; why did Jesus? The degree of offence taken is excessive. Why did his listeners not shrug and give the Bronx cheer? The crowd tries to throw Jesus over the cliff. But he passes through the midst of them, and slips away. It makes good narrative, even if we can't understand from this historical distance exactly what is going on.

The widow who gives two mites at the temple is strange too. Why is her gift more valuable and sincere than what the rich people put in? They may be giving sacrificially; a rich

person's heart may be in the right place; he or she is able to spread wider benefits. This is certainly what we believe today. We see such philanthropy in Bill and Melinda Gates. We can be snarky about their privilege, critical they made millions by Microsoft monopolizing the market. But I seriously ask myself, if I were Bill Gates, if I won the million-dollar lottery, would I do as much as he has, in a far-sighted and intelligent way, about the world's problems? I hope I would do something constructive but I suspect I would treat myself too. The Gates home is said to have an underwater music system in their swimming pool. I wonder, could something similar be piped through my bike wheels?

I hope I would be as self-deprecating as Bill in his interview with Rolling Stone. "The moral systems of religion, I think, are super important. We've raised our kids in a religious way; they've gone to the Catholic church that Melinda goes to and I participate in. I've been very lucky, and therefore I owe it to try and reduce the inequity in the world. That's kind of a religious belief. I mean, it's at least a moral belief." I like that he doesn't claim too much. I like his gee-golly-gosh qualifiers: I think, I mean, kind of, very lucky, I participate in a church I don't belong to, I owe it to try.

Would we hear more humility from the widow of Zarephath, or the two-mite lady at the temple? Could they express things any better than he does?

I like to picture the widow, with her son and Elijah, waiting out the drought. A drought Elijah brought on to punish Ahab who is out to get him for killing the prophets of Baal. It is somewhat like a revenge play, like Hamlet. I wonder whether behind the widow's coins was an irregular marriage. Was she giving to an institution that considered her a second-class citizen?

The stories are not so much journalistic reporting as conundrums, koans, brain-teasers. We couldn't act them out and expect good results. The Zarephath people would turn in the widow for harboring an undocumented immigrant; the temple lady would go on welfare. Is it responsible giving when you could actually earn your keep?

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive." ...Or did he? There is no evidence in the gospels for this statement. Paul refers to it in a farewell speech when (as so often, I am sorry to say) he is blowing his own horn. See Acts 20.

In his preaching heyday Abbot Aidan often presented the alternatives of pickpocket vs pilgrim. I won't say this is the *only* thing I remember him saying (I won't say this.) It's a good question to ask. Which am I, giver or taker, as I pass through life? On the other hand (and there

is always an other hand), when Jesus sends out the disciples, he says, “Take nothing for the journey, no backpack, walking-stick, no food, no money, no spare jacket. See if they welcome you.” That suggests you shouldn’t *take*, but you will have to *receive*. A pilgrim is not isolated, but connected. Therefore we must learn to receive gracefully, thankfully, humbly, not as if we are entitled to it.

Ultimately, giving is a response of gratitude for God’s provision. The widow of Zarephath and the woman at the temple treasury learned this, maybe not instantly, maybe gradually over time. It is worth considering the jug and the jar in our hearts. Are they empty, full--or half-full because we have baked our bread and shared it with someone? In sharing what we have, will we find that the jar does not go empty, that the jug does not go dry?

Gabriel Myers, OSB