Spirituality
Scripture for Life
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Spirituality



"The Prophet Elijah With the Widow of Zarephath and Her Son" (1650-72) by Abraham Van Dijck (Artvee)



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In spite of his biblical importance, we know little about Elijah. He showed up out of nowhere and disappeared mysteriously in a chariot of fire (1 Kings, 17:12 and 2 Kings 2:1-14). His worst problems began when he spoke out against King Ahab who, swayed by his wife Jezebel, began to worship foreign gods. Elijah was known for causing a drought and remedying it, working miracles and so antagonizing the king that he had to flee for his life. Today's description of his interaction with the foreign widow who took him in reminds me of some faith-filled women I have had the privilege of knowing.

When I lived in a small, very poor village in rural Peru, I learned things about the Gospel that cannot be communicated in a classroom. When I picture the widow of Zarephath, I think of Consuelo, an aptly named woman. Consuelo's family had a small piece of land on which they grew corn for their family of nine. During one harvest season, thieves began to come at night with pickup trucks to steal all the corn they could harvest from her and her neighbors. As Consuelo angrily told the story, she said, "Those pitiless robbers line their pockets, leaving the poor with nothing to eat!" She added, "I don't mind a hungry mother who picks six or eight ears for her family, we would never deny the poor, but stealing is inexcusable!"

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 10, 2024

1 Kings 17:10-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44 or 12:41-44

Much like the widow to whom Elijah turned after he started the drought, Consuelo could not deny others in need. God had told Elijah that he would meet a widow in

Zarephath who would feed him. Although the woman was obviously poorer than the prophet himself, Elijah asked her for food and water. With stark and humble honesty, she replied that she was about to use her minuscule remnant of flour and oil to prepare a last meal with her son. Elijah replied that, in spite of the obvious, her store would not be emptied until the famine had passed. And so it happened.

In today's Gospel, Jesus denounced religious leaders who demanded more of the poor than of themselves. Mark set the emotional tone for this scene by placing it just after Jesus caused the demise of a fig tree, threw the temple into disarray and expelled all moneymakers from the sacred space (Mark 11:12-19). Jesus had just described religious leaders saying, "They devour the houses of widows." For observant Jews, there could hardly be a more severe censure than that. (See Deuteronomy 27:14-26.)

Speaking of the widow, Jesus communicated two distinct messages. One was admiration for an impoverished woman who trusted enough to rely on God alone. Unlike the disciples who nervously ignored Jesus' talk of his upcoming sacrifice, she fearlessly gave her all. The widow modeled deep and generous faith. At the same time, Jesus was condemning those who paraded around in rich vestments, remaining aloof from and even taking advantage of the destitute. His praise of her reproved them.

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Typical of Gospel paradox, Jesus interpreted the scene before him as if it were a play revealing how the last shall be first and the first last. He made it clear that, like the emperor who strutted around in his invisible new clothes, pretentious religious leaders who take advantage of the lowly unintentionally mock their own arrogance, while people like the widow express their freedom and dignity by caring for the common good, no matter the cost.

Practical people will say that people like these three women are irresponsible and unrealistic; they should care for themselves and not risk needing others' help. Cynics, reviling what they see as a reckless management of resources, will blame them for their own poverty. Others believe that they should first take care of their own, and give once they have a surplus.

Both the women and their critics are in the business of creating society. The women might look on their detractors with sadness. They would pity people who are willing to settle for a "me first" society. They would wonder how the selfish do not die of loneliness.

The two widows exemplify what it means to act like Christ. Like Consuelo, their simple example dares others to believe that generosity, like love and the widow's jar of oil, need never be considered a limited resource. Their example can embolden others to act like they do. This is their free, courageous and faith-filled way of redeeming the world.

As we near the end of the liturgical year, the church calls us to think about the meaning of our lives. The widows offer us a challenge and an inspiration. Can we become free enough to trust that love and generosity are permanently renewable resources with which we can create a different world? Are we willing to take that wild, faith-filled risk?