

Homily for Sunday, Nov. 7, 2021 – 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Naïve story #1: As a young child, and listening to music coming from a transistor radio, I thought there was a shrunken jazz band actually inside the radio. I'm pretty sure that's not how it works, even though I still have no idea how transmitters or receivers work.

Naïve story #2: As a young child,

when the collection basket was being passed around during Mass, I thought all of the money collected—100% of it--was going to help the poor. A year's worth of money surely would eliminate poverty forever.

Last weekend I mentioned that for Jesus the space inside of you, from which you do anything, is as important or more important than the action itself. I shared a story of a busy father moving in the direction of his child out of guilt when he should have been moving toward him from a place of love.

In today's first reading, a widow (remember widows were the poorest and most vulnerable in Biblical times), just has enough food for one last meal before she and her son die. There has been a drought in the land for the 3 ½ years. Basically, they are on death-row awaiting the inevitable—starvation. Going on only the words of the prophet Elijah, ***“Do not be afraid”*** she is able to move from a space of fear, within herself, to a space of trust and generosity, not to mention, vulnerability. She gives the only thing keeping her and her son alive and is rewarded with a jar of meal that could not be emptied and with a jug of oil that could not fail. She is like the grain of wheat Jesus spoke about 700 years later that risks death before it can become an abundant harvest.

The gospel story today centers on another widow who also risks giving all she had when she dropped her two coins in the Temple treasury. Neither of these women are what we call philanthropists. They did not give a portion of their abundance. Instead, they both gave everything they had leaving themselves even more vulnerable. They both proved to be true givers, truly charitable people, not philanthropists. We might be tempted to call them naïve, but what's not up for

debate is that their giving came from a deep place of faith and love within each of them.

Some of you may have had the privilege, as I have, of being in Jerusalem and offering a prayer at the Western Wall (sometimes called the Wailing Wall). You've probably seen pictures of Jews, Gentiles, and even popes praying at this wall. When the Temple--the setting for today's gospel story--was destroyed in the year 70 A.D. only one wall remained—the Western Wall. For Jews worldwide, this is their most sacred site just as the Temple itself was the most sacred site for their ancestors. Of the four support walls on which the Temple was built, only the Western Wall remains.

Legend has it that when the Temple was being built, King Herod financed one supporting wall. The priestly caste financed another wall; the legal or teaching class financed the third wall. The last wall was financed with the gifts of the poor. It was the Western Wall. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D., all that remained was the Western Wall. The spirit of God, seemingly, left the holy of holies to reside in the wall of the poor.

Pope John XXIII said, "whoever has a heart full of love always has something to give." I might add that whenever we do give from that place of love, what we give endures and remains standing when everything else crumbles and passes away. When everything passes away, faith, hope and love will remain; and the greatest of these is love. If today's gospel story of the widow's mite were extended just a few more lines, we would have Jesus exiting the Temple and saying, "Take a look at this building because soon it will come crumbling down." What won't come crumbling down is the love that this widow has just shown. It will not go to the grave with her but will be told in her memory wherever the gospel is proclaimed.

I have to admit, though, each time I do hear this gospel story, I do feel called to be more generous with my own church offerings and well as with anyone I meet who is in need. Even if it initially comes from a place of guilt within me and not pure love, I still secretly hope it makes a difference in someone's life and expands my soul at the same time.

I think the story of the widow's mite pushes us beyond charity and generosity into the world of justice. The story isn't just about us admiring the widow and feeling

guilty about our own paltry generosity. Jesus's intention is to stir up anger and disgust at systemic injustice. The gospel starts off with Jesus telling us to ***beware of those who seek places of honour while simultaneously devouring the houses of widows***. The next line tells us that ***Jesus sat opposite the treasury*** and watched. He sits opposite the side of money and manipulation. He sits on the side of the poor and from that angle he sees and calls injustice for what it is. What the woman places in the treasury are two lepta (a lepton was the lowest denomination of a coin ever struck in any nation in history!). But for her, it was all she had to survive on. Perhaps she--in a naivete akin to my own when I was a boy--thought her money was going to help the poor, someone even poorer than herself. The money was not going to the poor but for the upkeep of the Temple; it was solicited on the basis that you were giving directly to God.

Could not some of the Temple's resources have been channelled to serve her and those like her? This was my question as a child when the collection basket was being passed around at Mass. Now that I'm the pastor--and realize how costly it is to keep buildings standing, utilities paid, insurance companies satisfied, and salaries paid—I've outgrown some of my naivete. Yet, I still wonder what stones will remain when this temple falls. Will love, generosity and care for poor remain our legacy when we are long gone?

Here's a suggestion to help us live the gospel in a concrete way. Let's always have before us the needs of the greater community. Let's not create budgets and then see what remains as possible outreach to the needy. Let's live more daring, like the two widows in the Scriptures lived. Let's move from the comfortable middle to the edges where the vulnerable are force to live all the time. When we're gone, let our legacy be soup for school children, coats for kids, crafty angels that helped Harvest House and Crossroads for Women. For the month of November, I encourage all of us, as we're able, to pool our resources in terms of money, diapers, and baby formula for the "Pregnancy and Wellness Centre of Moncton."

I know it sounds naïve, but who knows? Maybe the jar of meal will not go empty, and maybe the jug of oil will not fail.

Fr. Phil