32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Cycle B, 11.11.18
1 Kings 17:10-16/Hebrews 9:24-28/
Mark 12:38-44

WHOSE WORLD IS THIS ANYWAY?

The year was 1966, one year before the famous (or infamous) “Summer of Love” in San Francisco. A hit record that year when I was a junior in high school was This is a Man’s World, bellowed out by James Brown, the “godfather of Soul” as he was called. Quite appropriate since I attended an all-boys school...making it a man’s world. Fortunately, there were three all-girls high school in Toledo at the time – Notre Dame, McAuley and Ursuline Academies, and I had three strong and capable sisters at home (no brothers!), all of which reminded me that it wasn’t really a “man’s world.”

That song could be played as a theme song or a prelude to today’s scriptures. Two women living in a man’s world are exploited: the widow in the town of Zarephath in the Book of Kings and the widow at the temple treasury in Mark’s gospel. In many ways they are templates – symbols – of an entire class of people who are downtrodden and marginalized. Here were the lowly ones in ancient society. A widow had no one to care for her. Since it was a man’s world, when her husband died she was alone, defenseless. Perhaps one of her husband’s brothers would marry her and become her new protector. If not, she would have to go back to her family, if they would take her. This was a man’s world.

What kind of a cruel man is this prophet Elijah? He can see that the widow gathering sticks to make a fire has nothing. Yet, he asks for water first and then for a bit of bread. The culture of hospitality demanded that aid be given to strangers no matter the cost. The woman does what is required of a woman in a man’s world and seeks to provide for the stranger and waits on him, knowing full well that he’s a foreigner and that because of the drought, she and her son have nothing left for nourishment and are at death’s door.

Has Elijah no consideration for this widow in placing such a demand on her? But this is a man’s world.

The widow in the gospel doesn’t see the men who are exploiting her. We don’t know anything about her situation. We’re only told that she gave her last penny to the temple treasury. It wasn’t even a penny. In Greek the word for the coin was “lepton” which translates as the “thin one” or the “tiny one.” The famous actor Spencer Tracy talked about the early days of his career when he was dirt poor. He jokingly said the material of his pants was so worn and thin that he could sit on a dime and tell if it was heads or tails. Our dime is the thinnest of our coins. This woman’s was the thinnest and smallest of all the Roman coins. Jesus observed her putting the two coins in the treasury box. There were thirteen deposit boxes placed around the temple precincts between the Court of Women and the Court of the Gentiles for the upkeep of the temple. The people were coming and going, making their contributions. The containers were called “trumpets” because of their
shape and each receptacle was marked for a different purpose, like the collection envelopes parishioners receive marked for a different week or a special cause.

Jesus positioned himself near the court where the deposits were being made and did what he was good at. He observed. It seems that Jesus liked to observe. It gave him insight into human nature. By watching, he could learn what was going on in the hearts of people, as he saw their actions and listened to their words. After observing he would comment to his disciples, using the occasion as a ‘teachable moment’ to expound on lessons about the Kingdom of God. Jesus would say: See that farmer in the field sowing seed... then he would give them a parable about God’s Word. Or he would say: See that fig tree on the hill... then he would offer a teaching about being receptive to God’s grace. This time Jesus called his disciples to himself and said: See that widow over there who just put those two measly coins in the collection box. That’s all she’s got left to her name. So what was Jesus trying to teach his disciples at that moment?

The common interpretation has been: “She gave everything she had – sacrificial giving, giving ‘til it hurts. Now you go and do the same.” But the passage doesn’t end like that. In fact, if we look more closely at the scripture passages before and after this little story we may see a different interpretation and hear a different tone in Jesus’ voice other than praise for the widow’s action. Jesus had been telling the crowds to watch out for the scribes, the leaders of the temple, the religious officials. These men had grown corrupt, seeking the praise of others, putting the rules of religion before the needs of people. Jesus said: They devour the houses of the widows. Jesus could see through the rules of a man’s world and condemned the exploitation that left the poor and defenseless without any recourse. And the poor widow remained anonymous to the men who were exploiting her.

I think that’s the difference between the two widows in today’s scriptures. The prophet Elijah asked the woman in Zarephath for bread and water, but in their encounter, he gave her a promise that God would care for her. He restored her hope and renewed her spirit. Yes, he asked for food but gave her nourishment as well. Because she cared for the stranger, God would care for her and her son. The prophet and the widow entered into dialogue. He was open to hear her need and she was open to receive a pledge of God’s faithfulness and care. No longer did she and her son need to be afraid.

One of the lessons that Pope Francis is teaching the Church and the world is the blessing that happens when we truly encounter one another. The phrase "culture of encounter" figures prominently in the pope’s rhetoric during his travels around the world, where he often contrasts it with what he calls a "throw-away culture," meaning a society in which whole categories of people – the frail elderly, the abandoned child, the neglected poor, the desperate immigrant – are regarded as disposable. The Holy Father has said that it’s no good trying to communicate the
Gospel if we’re not open to encounter the lives and the truth of others, especially today, the lives and truth of women.

There’s a reason the #MeToo Movement took off like wildfire in October 2017. There’s a reason that, as of Wednesday, at least 118 women were elected to fill Congressional seats after Tuesday’s election. The new total includes 31 first-time House members, seven more than the record set for freshmen women during the 1992 "Year of the Woman" election. Our government needs to hear the voices of women.

On Monday the United States Conference of Catholic bishops will gather in Baltimore for their fall meeting. In this gathering of all men, women’s voices need to be heard as well. No longer can half the human race be marginalized or seen as inconsequential. No longer can decisions that affect the lives of all be made by only some. This is NOT a man’s Church. This is NOT a man’s world. This is OUR Church and OUR world – given to us by a loving God whom we encounter here in his saving Word, there at the Table of the Eucharist, here in our brothers and sisters in community and out there, in the faces of all whom we encounter, especially that lowly widow with her two coins who teaches us the meaning of giving our all to God -- God whose face is reflected in each of us – men and women, boys and girls – one human family... created by God... loved by God... and equal in God’s eyes.

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John Kasper, OSFS

Watch a moving rendition of the story of Elijah and the widow and her son: