

HOMILY FOR NOVEMBER 10-11, 2012

In today's readings we have two very moving stories of widows. In Israel, widows and orphans were considered among those who deserved the most compassion. At that time, women were dependent upon men for their livelihood. Without a husband or father, they were at the mercy of the community. Sometimes this worked, sometimes it didn't. I doubt that the widow of Zarephath had much community support because a drought covered the land. People did not have enough for themselves, let alone a widow and her son. Yet, she found it within herself, at Elijah's request, to share her last bit of food. She was rewarded many times over for this act.

Then, there's the woman who gave her mite to the temple treasury, although if we can believe what we just heard, her destitution was probably not alleviated by the scribes who were described as haughty people who devoured the houses of the widows. By rights, she should have been receiving help from the temple treasury.

So here we have these two women as examples for how we should live. What do these scriptures reveal to us? Generosity is not a large enough concept to describe these women. There are many generous people among us, but what we give, even though freely given, does not much change our status in life. Neither do I think these scriptures are telling us that we should impoverish ourselves for others, although there are some among us who do that.

I think what these women are teaching us about is the courage, the fortitude, it takes to do what we think is right even though the consequences may be dire. Courage demands that we step into an unknown future without knowing what the results will be. Courage demands following the depths of our conscience, the lure of the divine with no assurance of what may follow our decision to do so.

Courage means finding our own voices through honest reflection rather than echoing the tried and true recommendations and advice of others. It means, perhaps, risking the displeasure of those whom we would rather be able to please – like spouses, children, students, teachers, clergy, political leaders. It is so much easier to speak in the voices of others. Who wants to stand out as different?

Courage means speaking in our own voices. It also means following a path of growth. We go from childhood through puberty to adulthood, and there are challenges to meet at each stage. Changing means going out of our comfort zone into the new into which we are being called. If we don't change and encourage others to do the same, probably nothing bad will happen to us, we just won't be the person we are called to be nor will we live lives of deep satisfaction.

When I was thinking about this, I thought of an example from nature. Think of a tomato or a pumpkin. It grows from a seed through its early stages into a beautiful, mature fruit and then it begins its return to the earth. Or – and this happens also – It never fully matures, and it dies on the vine without ever achieving its purpose. It also then returns to the earth, but there is a degree of sadness that it never reached fruition.

We must have the courage to go where we are called, to full maturity, spiritually and physically, but especially spiritually. We need courage to leave behind outdated understandings of God in order to walk into a more fulfilling relationship with God. Courage demands that we not just think about it, but that we do it! We won't know how it will turn out unless we do it. It takes courage to leave behind the guilt and shame we may have about some past decision or action. Often, we become stuck in the past. This preoccupation with the past is more narcissistic, self-centered, than it is virtuous. We put the focus on ourselves rather than God. Do we have the courage to accept forgiveness by ourselves as well as by God? Do we have the courage to leave behind our grudges? Sometimes, it seems, people can make a grudge the center of their lives – to no one's advantage. Even though it may sound good to leave these things behind, sometimes we hesitate because we find it hard to imagine what life would be like without our defenses, our guilt, our grudges, our disappointments. To give them up may be disorienting for awhile. It takes courage.

We also have the example of many around us who do practice courage. We have our RCIA candidates. It takes fortitude to walk into a new way of life. We have the examples of two very different courageous women who were recently canonized. Just think of the future they walked into as they left behind all that was familiar to them. I often think of the courage it must take to enter into marriage. It takes courage to bring children into the world, and even more courage to raise them to maturity, helping them find their own voices.

We may not be called to give away our last bit of sustenance. But we are all called to respond to the divine spark within each of us that calls us to on-going transformation. That takes courage, a courage that trusts the Divine Lure even when we do not know how our transformed life will unfold. As we know, transformation is not a once and for all deal; it is on-going as we walk deeper and deeper into reality of God which is our own reality.

It we follow the example of these two widows about whom we read today, as well as the courageous men and women among whom we live, our jars of flour and jugs of oil will provide as much as we need for as long as we have need. I think this means that we will find deep satisfaction in our lives although they may not always be easy.

I recently read a poem about change and I would like to share some of it with you. The poet is Mark Jarman and it come from a collection of his poems entitle *Unholy Sonnets*.

The thin end of the wedge thrusts underneath
 The side that's formed a seal with the earth,

 The lever urges change, release, rebirth
 But the mind, settled in its cozy ditch,

 Resists, of course, loving its painful stasis.

 Before your're tipped from one life to another,
 You have to want this miracle to occur.

So, today, let our prayer be that as we move throughout the often repetitious days of our lives that we don't become overly comfortable, but remain sensitive to the call of the divine which will call us into deeper intimacy with Jesus and with the God of Jesus. In the ordinariness of our days, we may be the only ones to know we have answered the on-going calls to transformation, but we will know, and that is enough.

Nancy C. Ring