

Proper 27B
November 10-11, 2018
St. John's Cathedral

My daughter Andrea and I were browsing through one of those little shops in her home town that sells handmade items a few years ago and came across a simple bracelet with one word decorating it: HOPE. I bought it and started wearing it immediately, using it as kind of an icon – something I might look at – or look through in order to see something of God.

As impulse purchases go, this turned out to be a good choice. Two close friends were in real medical peril that year. Another had a difficult family situation. My bracelet reminded me to pray for them and to pray with and for hope in a couple of serious situations. It was a part of friendship. In difficult times something simple like that is a wonderful reminder of God's presence – recognized or unrecognized.

And sometimes, frankly, we do wonder where God is in times that are tough -- where there is scarcity or danger or worry. When we're kind of on the edge.

Today's Old Testament and Gospel readings open a window for us into the lives of two women, both widows, both unnamed, both living on the edge. These are stories of scarcity, but also of a kind of abundance that might open our eyes

Widows in the ancient near east lived a sparse life. They were often on the margins and sometimes almost invisible. Not only had they lost their spouses, they had also lost their social status because they were not attached to a man. They didn't own property, they didn't have any financial safety net, they had no rights. Most often they were very poor. It is said that there was no such thing as a rich widow in those times.

The widow in the reading from I Kings also lived in a time of great famine, when everyone struggled to feed themselves and their families. She and her son were down to the very last morsels of food in the house – a little oil and a little flour. It might have been their last meal.

Then Elijah showed up looking for something to eat. He made this impertinent demand, knowing how desperate things were. But he also made a promise that the flour and the oil would not run out until after there was rain – after the famine had ended. In other words, this woman and her son would not go hungry.

What a choice she had. Should she feed her son and herself, or should she feed this man who came to her house making this outrageous request along with some God talk? Common sense and parental instinct would say, “feed your child.” Otherwise he might die. But the dictates of hospitality said to feed the stranger. There he was on her doorstep. Was his promise some kind of hoax? Were his claims completely bogus? Was he a prophet or a con man?

For some reason she trusted Elijah and sure enough the flour and the oil did not run out. She trusted that Elijah (and more accurately Elijah’s God) would provide. The bottom line here isn’t so much about the widow or about Elijah but about God who provides in the most unexpected ways to give life. To give hope. To turn scarcity into abundance.

The story of the widow in the gospel comes as ‘section 2’ of this reading from Mark. Section 1 is Jesus’ scathing description of the scribes. These scribes, representing the religious establishment, walked around in long robes got the best seats in the synagogue, loved to be recognized and sat at the head table at banquets. He paints a picture of hypocrisy, noting their

long prayers for the sake of looking pious alongside some questionable ethics, misusing money that should have gone to the relief of the poor and the widows. . “They devour widows’ houses.” What church professional wouldn’t wince at that description of the kind of ‘fat cat religious bureaucrat.’ The consummate hypocrite. Hardly a portrait of holiness.

In sharp contrast is the widow who contributes to the temple treasury. Rich people had walked by and put large sums in the trumpet-shaped containers. Then came a poor widow to put in her donation – two small copper coins that weren’t worth much – at least in the marketplace. Those small coins would have made kind of a ‘clunk’ when dropped in, letting everyone in earshot how small the donation was. But that is what she had to offer. In fact, for her it was an enormous gift because it was all she had. In the scarcity of her life, she had given her all. The product of her generosity and trust.

Often this text is used as kind of a lever to exhort people to give more. It’s potentially a great guilt-producer. But let’s not hear it that way today. In context the passage is as much about how the scribes have taken advantage of the poor as it is about the widow.

The significance of her gift is the part of this story that intrigues me. Those two small coins don’t add up to much in the bigger picture, but in the context of her life they are enormous.

When I was in Mexico a few years ago with a group of Gonzaga students on a Habitat for Humanity trip, three of us visited some families with whom we had worked two summers before in the same village – Coatetelco. (That earlier trip had included Walt and Petty Johnson among the builders.) Coatetelco, about a two-hour drive southwest of Mexico City, is one of those places you can barely find on a map. People just eke out a living there. There aren’t

many jobs in the tiny town or on the sparse farms that surround it. Even the farm animals are skinny. Hardly anyone has a car. Hard times are a way of life.

We arranged to visit the folks from the earlier project one afternoon and it was wonderful to see the families again. But I was amazed and a little embarrassed at the lavish hospitality. We had not come for dinner, but they still served us wonderful, warm tamales and fruit. A lot of their cooking is done in outdoor kitchens and over a wood fire, so it is hard work. When we left they gave us a big bag of tamales to share with the students.

On the way back we also visited Alfredo, the man whose home we helped to build that first summer. Alfredo had gotten a job as a plumber in a nearby city and had just taken the long bus ride home. He happily showed us the little patio that he had added to his simple three-room house. Then he gave us a huge bowl of fruit to take with us. The tamales, the fruit were gifts from the heart. Gifts from people who had very little. I was humbled.

A couple of days later we finished our work on the house where the students were working and prepared for a fiesta with the family and other folks who had helped to build it. We had bought the family a set of dishes and the students were excited to give them that simple gift.

But during the fiesta, something surprising happened. All of us in our group – more than a dozen of us – received gifts from the families in the village. The two men got beer steins. Others got embroidered pillowcases, pottery or lovely handmade things. I received a wooden rosary, something that I kept on my desk at the diocesan office for years. It was an act of incredible generosity, sharing from an abundance that most of us would see as scarcity.

Certainly a dramatic learning for the students was that abundance looks very different in rural Mexico than it does on an urban college campus in Spokane. Abundance doesn't look like having a lot of stuff. The generosity of our new friends in Coatatelco flowed naturally from people who lived not out of fear of scarcity, but out of trust that there would be enough – and an appreciation for what each day brought.

There is no glamor in either the poverty of rural Mexico or in the poverty of widows in the ancient near east – or in the poverty of Spokane and its rural neighbors. No romance at all. But there are lessons to be learned. Hospitality and generosity are possible – are holy – even in hard times. Trust and hope prevail – trust that God will provide is at the center.

Hard times tug at our anxieties about having enough. I know that is true in my life. Maybe the lesson we learn from the two stories about widows we heard today is about living confidently in the love of God, whose care for us sustains us in good times and bad. Scripture is full of reminders of this. So is life, but we often need to flail around in it a bit before we get it.

I like a prayer from England by Jan Berry that ends like this: "Give us enough trust to live secure in your love to share it freely with others in open-handed confidence that your grace will never run out."

Hope is at the center. Trust is at the center. Love is at the center. May these two women – widows at the end of their rope – get under our skin today. May their risky generosity jump-start our own generosity and our faith and trust in the God who loves us deeply.