

**Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Nov. 12, 2006)**

A Tale of Two Widows

We've just heard a tale of two widows: the widow of Zarephath and the widow Jesus commends in the Gospel. They obviously have something in common and that is why the church has put these two stories together. Each one gives of her substance to help someone else, not as people usually give, out of their abundance.

The prophet Elijah, tired and hungry from a journey, asks the first person he meets in Zarephath for a drink and for something to eat. It happens to be a poor widow who tells him she has next to nothing, that she and her son are about to eat what little they have, and that when they have eaten it, she says they will die because there is no more. But Elijah knows a little more than the widow does and he tells her, "Don't be afraid. God will provide." Don't worry, don't be afraid, be at peace. How often do we hear that in the pages of the Bible? When people seem to be in desperate situations, God sends someone, another person, maybe an angel, or in the Gospels, Jesus himself, telling people not to be afraid. Why? Because God is with them. God is faithful to his people no matter what. The people might wander off and follow other gods, but God does not abandon them.

And indeed, true to the prophet's word, God does provide. The widow's jar of flour does not go empty and her jug of oil does not run dry, just as God had promised through the prophet, Elijah.

What is probably even more extraordinary than the wonder God worked for this poor widow is the fact that she believed what the prophet told her. She put her trust and confidence in the word of God. And God rewarded her.

In the Gospel passage we heard of another poor widow.

Let's try to put ourselves into the story as Mark tells it and see if we can actually visualize what is going on. Jesus is in the temple. Or more likely just outside the temple where thirteen receptacles for offerings surround the outer court. There is usually a great deal of hustle and bustle here with many people coming and going, all of them eager to approach one of the jars and throw in their contributions. Jesus sees some scribes and

has some pretty hard things to say about them. They like to parade around in fancy clothes and attract a lot of attention especially as they toss their own money into the receptacles. In those days there was no paper money so they threw in coins which of course made some noise. The larger the contribution the more noise they made. Jesus attacks their hypocrisy. They devour the savings of widows, he says, while mumbling pious prayers.

Then in the midst of fancy clothes and jingling coins Jesus spies a widow. She approaches the container shyly and shyly drops in her two small coins. There is hardly a sound because her offering is worth only a few cents. And Jesus praises her. The others, he says, have contributed from their surplus wealth, but she from her poverty, has contributed her whole livelihood.

It's an extraordinary act of generosity. Where did she get the courage to do this? How did she come by the confidence that would allow her to give everything she had, obviously placing all her trust in God, just as Elijah had encouraged the widow of Zarephath?

Last week we heard Jesus tell a different kind of scribe that the two greatest commandments are to love God above all and our neighbor as ourselves. In John's Gospel Jesus goes even further and says, "Love one another as I have loved you." As I have loved you. Jesus loved us to death quite literally. He gave himself completely to us, for us, and when he says love one another as I have loved you he is asking us to do the same thing. It's a great challenge. But what we see in this Gospel story is someone who in point of fact did exactly that. The widow gave of herself completely, unselfishly. It's what the Lord asks of all of us, obviously not easy, and yet as God said to Paul when he seemed to be asking impossible things of him, "My grace is sufficient for you." This is pretty profound spirituality

It's also the sort of thing that can happen when we take the reign of God and the teachings of Jesus Christ seriously. It's what we are called to in our Eucharistic celebration today. It's an invitation to love, to love as Jesus loved. He responds to the generosity of this poor woman because she is one of those for whom he cares the most. And he asks us to do the same. After all, as St. Theresa of Avila once said, it's only through us that God can do what God wants to do in our world today. God holds the outcasts with our arms. God searches with our eyes and heals with our words and our

actions. And God is waiting to hear the sound of our offering. (And by that I do not mean what you are going to put in the collection basket today.)