

Homily for Sunday, November 8, 2009 (32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time)
1 Kings 17:2-10-16; Psalm 146:1, 7-10; Hebrews 9:24-36; Mark 12:38-44

I'm pretty much a soft touch for kids selling things. Whether it's Girl Scout cookies to support a local troop, candy bars to help the little league team, or magazines to support a Catholic school, I'm almost always going to reach in my wallet and help because I support the mission of the sponsoring organization and want to affirm the child or teen, too.

Recently, however, I had an experience where I found it too difficult to give to children who were selling things. I was in Managua, Nicaragua to visit some of our friars there. By most accounts, Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Only Haiti is poorer.

On many busy streets, particularly the main avenue going to and from the airport, there were children—some who couldn't have been older than six or seven—selling fruit, nuts, candy and various trinkets. When a light turned red, they and the adult vendors would jump into the lanes of temporarily parked cars to hawk their wares to harried drivers. The work was dirty and dangerous; it was a school day; and in many cases their mothers were sitting on the curb (often with a baby in their arms) supervising them.

It was a disturbing scene. While I could see the desperate conditions that were at the root of it, I didn't want to encourage something so dangerous by buying things from these children. Would you want your young son or daughter making change for someone in the middle of a six lane road choked with exhaust fumes and filled with impatient people in trucks and cars?

How could something so fundamentally similar—children selling things—cause such different reactions? Context: something which seems healthy and admirable in one situation can be dangerous and even maddening in another.

We might consider that in reflecting on our gospel reading today. "The widow's mite" is one of the most powerful images of the Scriptures and has often been used to promote the virtue of self-sacrifice, the dignity of the poor, and the importance of stewardship. Such observations are quite natural if our focus is limited to the act itself: a woman of limited means coming to the temple and giving "all she had, her whole livelihood."

It's only when we step back and widen the angle of our contextual lenses that we realize we may not have understood the event as well as Jesus and his disciples did. Then the more appropriate title for the story may not be "The Widow's Mite" but rather "The Temple Tragedy" or "Religious Leaders Beware!"

Due to the prevailing patriarchy, cultural mores, and socio-economic system, the status of widows in ancient Israel was shaky at best. Widows had no inheritance rights, were often poor and prone to exploitation and abuse.

Widowhood was viewed by some as a sign of disgrace in light of the spouse's premature death which, along with disability and disease, was often assumed to be a judgment upon sin.

Although the the law of Levirate marriage (obligating a brother to marry his brother's widow) provided some possible protection or security, it wasn't always followed; and many times widows were left to rely on public charity or illegal means (e.g., prostitution) to get by. As we witnessed in our reading from 1 Kings 17, widows and their children often lived a hand to mouth existence.

God's concern for widows, however, is expressed throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Deut 14:29, Ps 94:1-7, Isa 1:16-17, 21-25). Along with orphans and immigrants, they were numbered among the most vulnerable members of society and the special object of divine attention and care. Their exploitation and mistreatment was considered especially grievous, and God's mercy on Israel was often linked to Israel's justice and mercy for them, among others (see, e.g., Deut 10:14-19).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Jesus strongly condemned those scribes who were seduced by the perks of their offices and would "devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext recite lengthy prayers." Thus, when he witnessed a poor widow putting in a couple of small coins to pay the temple tax (which in part supported the scribes), his comment that she "put in more than all the other contributors" and gave "her whole livelihood" was at least as much a lament and a critique as it was a commendation.

Who are the widows of today? Certainly there are many throughout the world that continue to lose their husbands to war, disease and the violent tragedies like the one we just witnessed at Fort Hood, Texas. But there are also an increasing number of women who are *de facto* widows, including those whose husbands are incarcerated and others who have been left alone with their children by those whose understanding of "manhood" and fatherhood are limited to the act of conception. Just as in the time of Jesus, many of these women are also socially, economically and even spiritually marginalized. Yet God's care and concern for them is no less than for the widows of ancient days.

One of the distinctive marks of the early church was the support it gave to widows. As we witnessed in Acts 6, this outreach was not without its difficulties; but it also gave rise to a new ministry of service—*diakono*i or the diaconate. Over time, in fact, the Church even developed an "order of widows," an organized way in which this group of women could not only be supported but could also support each other. With all of the women who are *de facto* as well as more traditional widows in many of our communities today, perhaps it is time to resurrect and update this ancient order in the Church. +