

By Father Charles Bowes

1 Kings 17:10-16
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

We need help to risk everything to follow Jesus.

It's important to be careful how we handle this passage from Mark chapter 12 – the first part of it in which Jesus is critical of the Scribes' hypocrisy. "Beware of the Scribes, who long to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, etc." It's easy to develop a kind of anti-Semitism from this. But that is not the intent of the author. St. Mark's gospel is addressed to his own community, some of whom were acting as though they had it made. How about us? Do we figure we have it all sewn up – this business of religion and being right with God? "Watch out," says Jesus.

Then the story continues whereby Jesus salutes an unknown woman's great and unheralded sacrifice. Widows in our assemblies and around the world are doing this very thing everyday, acting with grace and heroism under dire circumstances, without fanfare – the very opposite of those who think they have it made – the Scribes.

In order to appreciate this story, it's necessary to examine the nature of the biblical widow. She was unchampioned in a culture that had no role for a woman apart from a man. Unable to own property, she had to hope for a return to her father's house, or for a grown son, or for a male in-law to give her a son and provide for her. Barring those conditions, she could prostitute herself, rely on charity, or quietly scratch out a living until she died. The widow was lumped together with the orphan and the stranger as one who had no rights and no resources apart from the variable kindness of others.

The definition of the biblical widow would not simply be reserved for women with deceased husbands today. Many single parents, the isolated elderly, latch-key children, migrant workers, and the mentally ill fit the description of those who have only God and the kindness of strangers to rely upon. It is their kindness and remarkable example of generosity out of want that Jesus upholds to us today. If they can be so giving, those who have so little, how much more is expected of us?

In the story, Jesus observes a poor widow giving her only two coins to the temple treasury. Again, a wealthy person could follow the legal calculations for tithes and be considered righteous and generous. But Jesus draws his disciples' attention to the widow's

action, assuring them that she had given more than these others. She was the example of true Jewish piety in her total generosity. He was eager for his disciples to see that she had given up not just a few coins, but the security that they represented. Just think of it – where would we be without our health care plans, our Social Security, our investments and property – would we dare risk all that to follow Jesus? I know I'd have a hard time doing it. I certainly fall short from the ideal presented here.

This weekend at the 11:30 Mass we welcomed some folks interested in embracing the Catholic faith – having been baptized in another Christian tradition. On behalf of us all, they embraced the cross – renewed their commitment to follow this Jesus. What a risk! What an example they are to us, as was the widow in Mark chapter 12. Jesus' desire is for his followers to seek to serve, not to be applauded, and to find their security in God rather than in wealth or fame. We're all called to this place.

The remarkable and gifted founder of the *La Poustinia* Movement in Canada, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, tells a tale of her experience: "I remember only the first name of the person whose story I'm now going to relate. Maybe she never had a surname! Yet I remember her very well. Every Saturday, rain or shine, cold or hot, she would come through the door of our House of Hospitality. Slowly, with tired step, she would walk up to my desk, and after a few words of greeting, lay on top of it in a tidy row four dirty pennies. Then she would explain almost in a whisper, that this was all she had left of her pay to give to Christ and to the poor. Then, with a little smile and bow, she would ask for our prayers.

She was a black woman, a widow. She earned her living by scrubbing office floors at night. Her name was Martha.

She brought her four pennies every week for four years. Then one Saturday she did not come. I never saw her again. Later, someone along the street told me about a poor woman who was buried in an unmarked grave in a potter's field. I asked the woman's name. All they could remember was that her first name was Martha."

And let us pray: O good and gracious God, you never cease to call your people into total self-surrender. Embrace our weakness, soften our fear that we may be your disciples and so touch your world with peace and hope.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

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to follow Jesus.**