

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time: Care for the Weakest

I would like to begin this afternoon by focusing in on the plight of widows as presented in the Bible. In ancient times if a man died, his widow was in a precarious situation if she did not have an adult son to protect her and care for her. The widow from the first reading, the widow of Zeraphath, was suffering from the famine. She did have a son, but he was a little child. Imagine her horror when she realized that she could scrape just a little more food for her son and herself, before they would both starve to death. No one cared about her, no one except God who sent the prophet Elijah to her. But first, she had to trust in God. She had to follow the law of hospitality, caring for the stranger. And God rewarded her generosity.

Elijah's successor as prophet for Israel, Elisha, came upon another widow who cried to him, "Creditors have come to take my two children away as slaves." She had no defender. She was at the mercy of dishonest judges. We also see this in the first part of today's Gospel where Jesus attacks the scribes who devour the houses of widows. The Books of *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* in the Hebrew Scriptures places a curse on anyone who would deprive widows of justice, but the fact of the matter is that shrewd businessmen found ways around the laws to take advantage of these defenseless women. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Malachi all note that the land suffers the sin of those who abuse widows.

One of the most beautiful stories in the Bible is the story of a widow and her daughter-in-law, Naomi and Ruth from the *Book of Ruth*. When Naomi's husband and sons died, she was left without any support. She told her daughters-in-law to return to their fathers' homes for their own protection. One, Orpah, left her. The other, Ruth, a Moabite, not a Hebrew, stayed with Naomi to care for her. "*Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God, my God.*" Naomi returned to Judea, to her native Bethlehem along with Ruth. In her desperation Naomi cried to the people there, "*No longer call me Naomi, a name that means 'pleasant'.* *Instead, call me Mara, a name that means 'bitter'.*" Naomi and Ruth survived on gleaning whatever was left over in the barley fields after the harvesters finished their work. God rewarded Ruth through a rich farmer Boaz, who was attracted by the young woman's beauty, her virtue and her plight. He told his laborers to be sure to leave enough for Ruth and Naomi to glean. Boaz and Ruth married and God rewarded them in a way beyond their fondest imagination. One of their great grandchildren would be King David. Another descendent, a thousand years away, would be Jesus Christ. God can never be outdone in generosity.

Now, let's look at the widow of the Gospel reading. Jesus' statement that she gave from her poverty her whole livelihood was a praise of her generosity. It was also a condemnation of society who had left her so destitute that she, like the widow of Zeraphath, had nothing left to rely on. But she was rich. She was rich in faith. Jesus contrasted the widow with those with money who gave from their surplus, but who did not have the faith to give from their need. So often the poor are more generous than the rich. Back to the widow in the Gospel. How had this widow become impoverished?

Had bankers mismanaged her money so that she had lost the little she had? Had shrewd people found ways to take advantage of her? Or was she merely a victim of the economic system of her day?

How had it happened that society could take advantage of the destitute? How does it happen that society continues to take advantage of those who have no protection?

Our recent Popes, particularly Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Francis, have written quite a lot about the sinful structures of society. St. John Paul II suffered through the reign of Nazi Terror in Poland and the destruction of thought by the communists. He experienced the plight of the poor and the worship of materialism of the capitalists. St. John Paul II saw evil in all three, fascism, communism and materialistic capitalism.

Pope Francis has been true to his determination to lead the Church to be mindful of the poor. Both popes have written about ideologies that have held and continue to hold the world hostage to sin.

Yet, they do not see these ideologies as some sort of beings in their own rights. Rather, be they fascism, communism or materialistic capitalism, these ideologies are constructed in such a way that they profit by preying upon the helpless. They are established and supported by people whose sum total of personal sins have formed them into vehicles for their illicit gain.

Those who formed and supported the Nazi's concept and glorification of Aryan supremacy saw their union as an opportunity to steal the goods and lands of other people be they Jews within Germany or Europe or gypsies, Poles, Slavs, etc. The Nazis were not aliens from another world. They were people like you and me who under the guise of nationalism saw an opportunity to profit from the weakness of others. It was the sum total of personal sins that formed Nazism. There were many in Germany who were not Nazis but who quietly supported them when they realized the gain they received through their sins.

In the same way, communism evolved from the ideal of workers sharing equally in the profit of their work to the destruction of all morality by those who wished to steal the goods of some for the sake of others. Since morality and communism could not co-exist, God had to be eliminated from the communist country. But the communists were also not aliens from another planet. They were people who sought to take advantage of others by devising a religion of the social order to replace the spirituality of God.

The complaints that both popes have made regarding materialistic capitalism target those in business who disregard the rights of the impoverished for the sake of the wealthy. If people in Latin America, Asia or Africa are living a substandard existence so that Europeans and Americans can benefit from cheap labor, so be it. If

their children have to work in factories so our children can have cheaper Nikes, so be it. How has our society come to this? Materialistic capitalism did not fall out of the sky. It resulted from the number of people who firmly believe that the wealthy have the right to take advantage of the poor. Some will actually say, "Might makes right." Others will sight an economic application of Darwinian evolution, "the right people get the stuff, the wrong people don't." They will say and believe that the present situation of people in the world, the division of the world into the haves and have nots, is merely the survival of the fittest. Materialistic Capitalism, like Nazism and Communism, is the sum total of personal sins, the decision to take advantage of the less fortunate for personal gain.

We have quite a challenge here. We live in a capitalistic society. Therefore, we, the Church, must be determined that the presence of God animate the decisions of business. We cannot allow the rich to gain from taking advantage of the poor. We have to protect widows.

Any doctor will tell you that the first step to healing is recognition of the sickness. We need to be aware that to the extent that we participate in the concept that some must lose so others can gain, we are uniting our personal sins of greed and materialism to the sum total of a sinful society. For this we need the mercy of God.

It is not that wealth is bad. What is wrong and sinful is using improper means to gain wealth. What is wrong and sinful is wasting wealth without regard to the poor around us.

Jesus marveled that a widow who had so little gave to the Temple Treasury. He rejoices when those like her are cared for by society. We, the rich, should rejoice when there is care for the poor. Indeed, the strength of our society, and any society, is measured by the concern we have for our weakest members.