

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

Have you ever noticed that Jesus doesn't have much regard for what he sees happening in the temple? Today we find him teaching there, in that place where the religious establishment is as comfortable as they would be at home, in power and control of everything that happens there. Jesus says to his students, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!" We know that Jesus says what's on his mind. He's softhearted but thick-skinned, always looking for suffering to be healed, wrongs to be righted, never concerned with what others think of him, an attitude he paid for dearly at the end of his life. And today, as if this first insult to the scribes was not enough, he adds to it. "They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers." Then here comes the widow, placing her two little coins in the treasury as required by temple law, making his point very clear!

We don't know the widow's circumstances, except that she is poor but still gives what she is expected to give. At first glance, Jesus' lesson here seems to be about giving practices, and he does make a good point. It's a lot easier to give when our resources are abundant, but perhaps more meaningful when we have to scrape in order to give. Saint Basil the Great, Bishop of Caesarea in the fourth century, said this about that: "I am wronging no one,' you say, 'I am merely holding on to what is mine.' What is yours! Who gave it to you so that you could bring it into life with you? Why, you are like a man who pinches a seat at the theater at the expense of latecomers, claiming ownership of what was for common use. That's what the rich are like; having seized what belongs to all, they claim it as their own on the basis of having got there first. Whereas if everyone took for himself enough to meet his immediate needs and released the rest for those in need of it, there would be no rich and no poor."

There's no indication of what scripture prompted St. Basil to speak those words, although as a Bishop he was undoubtedly exposed to the reality of life for folks who came to the church seeking help. "The poor will always be with you," according to Jesus, and our lesson from First Kings reminds us they always have been. The widow of Zarephath is symbolic, especially in our time, of too many families in our world who face death because they have nothing to eat. I do not know what this desperation feels like; I don't know that any of you who do, either. Perhaps the closest we can come to knowing is by imagining the worst thing that could possibly happen to us. In my mind, though, I can see this woman, whose posture and appearance tells her story. She has lost hope, given up, surrendered to the inevitable. When Elijah tells her to make him a little cake and promises that "the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail," she does as he requests. Like the widow in the temple, there is no abundance in her life, yet she gives from her poverty.

If we lined up all the characters from these two lessons and examined what they have to say to us, I do not believe the lesson they teach us would be only about money and giving, although there are surely preachers everywhere today using this lesson as the basis for a stewardship sermon. Here we have two widows, both of whom have found themselves in dire straits, and both of whom respond faithfully from their poverty. We have Elijah, after God had provided him water and food in a time of severe drought, following God's command to go to Zarephath to seek food from a widow there. He finds this woman who is probably worse off than he is but who feeds him anyway. Looking across at these characters, at the widows and the prophet, are the scribes, about whom Jesus has nothing good to say. They stand and watch, keeping their laws and their rules and expecting others to do the same, regardless of whether the same is even possible for the others. We have to wonder what impact these religious folks have on the people they encounter, and what

impact the faithful folks have on their world? And the question we are called to ask ourselves is this: Are we religious or faithful?

In his book *The Orthodox Heretic*, Peter Rollins tells the story of “a fiery preacher who possessed a powerful but unusual gift.¹ He had learned at an early age that when he prayed for individuals, they would supernaturally lose all of their religious convictions. They would invariably lose all of their beliefs about the prophets, the sacred Scriptures, and even God. So he learned not to pray for people, but instead limited himself to preaching inspiring sermons and doing good works.

“However, one day while traveling across the country the preacher found himself in conversation with a businessman who happened to be going in the same direction. This businessman was a very powerful and ruthless merchant banker, one who was honored by his colleagues and respected by his adversaries.

“Their conversation began because the businessman, possessing a deep, abiding faith, had noticed the preacher reading from the Bible. He introduced himself to the preacher and they began to talk, the businessman sharing with the preacher about his faith in God and his love of Christ. He also shared that at times his work challenged his Christian convictions, but he worked hard to keep his faith intact, attending church every Sunday, participating in a prayer group and a weekly Bible study and doing youth work. He said those activities reminded him who he really was. Listening to the businessman, the preacher suddenly realized the purpose of his unseemly gift. He turned to the businessman and said, “Would you allow me to pray a blessing into your life?”

The businessman said yes, of course; after all, no religious person would turn down a blessing and he had no way of knowing what would happen. The preacher muttered a simple prayer, and then the man opened his eyes in astonishment. “What a fool I have been for all these years!” he proclaimed. “It is clear to me now that there is no God above looking out for me, no sacred texts to guide me, and no Spirit to inspire and protect me.”

The two men parted company and the confused businessman returned home. Now that he no longer had religious beliefs, he found it increasingly difficult to continue in his line of work as a hard-nosed businessman working in a corrupt system, rather than a man of God. He began to despise his work, and within months gave it up completely after suffering a breakdown. Afterward, he quit his job, he felt better about himself. He gave to the poor all the riches he had accumulated and used his experience and expertise to challenge the system he had been part of and to help those who had been oppressed by it.

Many years later, the businessman was walking through town one day when he saw the preacher again. Falling at the preacher’s feet, he wept with joy, looked up at the preacher and smiled. “Thank you, my dear friend,” he said, “for helping me discover my faith.”

The question for us is not whether we are religious or faithful. The better question for us to ask instead is how our religion feeds our faith. Here at St. Francis, we have so many possibilities for people who want to be involved: Welcome Table, Bible Study and other Christian Formation offerings, worship ministries, our Thanksgiving Luncheon and Angel Tree Ministry. The list goes on and the question might be phrased a different way. Are we doing these things because our religion expects it? Or because they give meaning to our faith? Is it our religion that prepares us to do these things and to face difficulties like those of the widows and the prophet? Or does that come from our faith? Religion is not the end—it is a *means* to the end. In the words of today’s passage from Hebrews, “Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands.” Christ does enter a sanctuary made by human hearts.

Enter the sanctuaries of our hearts, dear Lord, and strengthen our faith. *Amen.*

¹ Rollins, Peter. *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales*. Paraclete Press, Brewster, MA, 2009. Pp. 57-60.