

Today, we are invited to reflect upon the lives of two widows. These poor women are more than characters in the biblical drama. They are our mothers in the faith, our ancestors in the family of God. While their lives were very, very poor in terms of material things, they stand out as people whose lives were immeasurably rich in the substance of trust.

The first widow lived in the gentile territory of Phoenicia during the time King Ahab ruled the northern kingdom of Samaria in the ninth century B.C. The second widow was a woman Jesus spotted one day when he was sitting near the treasury at the Jerusalem Temple. There is an important similarity in these two women: Both of them trusted in God enough to give everything for God. We can learn about faith from them as we reflect upon their lives. It was their faith above everything else that caused them to be remembered and their story to be repeated right down to our own generation.

For example, unusual faith can be found in unlikely places. It is scandalous that the woman to whom Elijah turned for help was a gentile. When a gentile woman's faith is greater than that of God's own people, you know things are bad. The contrast is sharpened by the fact that this poor widow lived in the place from which the evil queen Jezebel had come. Who would think of going to such a place and finding such a person with such an unusual amount of faith in God?

It is equally scandalous that the woman at the temple should be singled out by Jesus as an example of piety. She is such a contrast to the teachers of the law who wore their piety wherever they went. Who would think to look at such a shriveled up old person to see the manifestation of God's glory?

For that matter, who would think to look at a carpenter's son from Nazareth to behold the savior of the world? Who would expect to see the complete sacrifice of God on behalf of humanity carried out on the town garbage dump instead of upon the altar of the Temple?

Where do you look for faith? In the market place or in the wilderness? In your possessions or in your poverty? Well, the truth is that God is in all those places. The key is to learn to recognize God. More often than not, it seems that those who have learned this skill usually learned it in the wilderness of their lives because it is there that they are completely emptied of the ego-inflating baubles and securities and excuses that block dependence upon God alone. Those things make us think we are self-sufficient. There is not much that I admire about the life of Janis Joplin, but in a line from a Kris Kristofferson song she sang about Bobbie McGee there is a great truth that gives clarity to the point I am trying to make: "freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." Faith is just another word for nothing left to lose.

Jesus taught his disciples to look for examples of faith and signs of God's reign in places and in persons others overlook. He also taught them to look into the dark places of their own lives in order to recognize the barrenness and need, which, in the hands of God, can be fertile soil for a great faith. When we reach the point at which we have nothing left to lose, faith often has the best chance.

In the stories of these two widows, we see the demonstration of one of the most important expressions of spiritual leadership – the correction of misperceptions of reality. One of the most dangerous expressions to emerge from the collective folk wisdom of our age is the declaration that "perception is reality." On one level, it is true. However, the expression is most often applied not to right perception but to misperception and leads to a failure of leadership. It is the responsibility of leaders to correct misperception, not allow it to be treated as reality. Perception is a process – the process of perceiving. To perceive is to

become aware of some reality directly through any of the senses, especially sight or hearing. To perceive is to achieve understanding of reality. When the process of perception leads to a misunderstanding of reality, for a leader to let it stand, to foster it, or to allow it to guide decisions is a failure in leadership. Neither Elijah nor Jesus failed in today's texts!

The Phoenician widow faced life with the perception of scarcity. Elijah asked her to trust in God's abundance. She did and her trust (faith) was rewarded with a new and more glorious reality. Through the process of right perception, a new way of looking at things, her anxiety gave way to certainty.

Jesus did not want his disciples to perceive that the teachers of the law were people of integrity. They appeared to be generous, but they were not. Exercising wise spiritual leadership, Jesus called attention to the poor widow, whose offering appeared small in contrast to the offerings of the Pharisees. Just as the disciples may have incorrectly perceived that the teachers of the law were good examples of faith and generosity, so they may have incorrectly perceived that the poor widow was not. Jesus pointed out to them something that they may have overlooked and that detail changed everything. He pointed out that the poor widow's offering was not simply a percentage of what she had, but it was everything she had. She held back nothing. Her faith and generosity was actually the most influential of all.

Perception really is everything. But leaders must never cater to misperception. Leaders have a responsibility to correct them. And leaders have a duty to uphold right perceptions by acting on them.

Joy and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. Neither of these two widows described her offering as a sacrifice. I have in mind a particular widow I once knew and who inspired me. By many standards, she was relatively poor and had an enormous burden to bear. But that perception was not reality. She never referred to her life in terms of sacrifice. Her burden was her joy. What I described as a sacrifice, she described as a joy. That is the way it always is with people of remarkable faith.

If I lavish my love on you, you may call it a sacrifice if you wish, but I may not. In order for the word "sacrifice" to remain healthy, it must be confined to the comments of those who interpret the act of giving by another. On the lips of one who is doing the giving, the word "sacrifice" smacks of self-righteousness.

My widow friend once told me of a response given to her by a man who did her a great kindness. She thanked him and he said to her, "never forget what others do for you and never remember what you do for others." Joy and sacrifice are two sides of the same coin. Each of us needs to learn which side of the coin to look at when we drop it into the offering plate.

There is another way of saying it all: The more one gives, the greater one's capacity to receive.

The poor widows, like the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, and the little child Jesus used as an example of trust, present the image of emptiness before God. In God's version of reality, to be empty is to have capacity, capacity to be filled. But that means receiving, not giving or doing, and the kingdom of God is received. Having been rid of everything, having stood empty and childlike and naked and poor without claim before God, one is able to receive everything, even one's own life, as a gift. Wealth in God's realm of reality is measured in these terms. That is why Jesus exhorts us to seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness. Everything else we need will be added.

So, with empty and receptive lives we come here to God's table today. God wants to fill us up with love divine. God wants us to be fully who we are. God tells us now as in the beginning of time how much God trusts us and longs for us to trust in return, to depend upon God alone. The miracle God worked with the flour and oil of the Phoenician widow is nothing compared to the miracle God works with your life and mine when our capacity to give is first the capacity to receive by faith that which God offers.