

32 Ord, Sunday B
1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44
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This bishops of the United States will be convening this week in Baltimore for their annual meeting. The scheduled agenda is a document on racism they are preparing to publish. But most observers are certain that the clergy sexual abuse scandal—and particularly the failure of bishops to hold themselves accountable—will dominate the meeting. The lack of transparency by many bishops continues to simmer and boil over as grand juries and justice departments demand documents, letters, and records of priests, diocese by diocese and state by state.

The bishops have scheduled a spiritual retreat for themselves in January, ostensibly to examine themselves and do penance collectively. The editorial page of the National Catholic Reporter made a suggestion to them this week:

Attend [your retreat] in mufti and leave all the trappings, the collars and black suits, all the silk and lace and pectoral crosses at home. God will recognize you. Take that little step in humility and actually meet as brothers. Seek out those among you who have suffered, who have known what it means to come through pain or addiction or illness. When it is over, ... Be quiet. No grand pronouncements.

The widow in today's gospel offers a stark contrast to men of power and wealth. Let us carefully observe her, just as Jesus did. She is probably dressed in widow's weeds, which makes her stand out. But this is a brief glance. In her daily life, she is overlooked. She is where she should be, we think. A widow. Poor. She has little or nothing. We see her and we know we would not like to be her or in her situation.

For centuries, preachers have presented this widow as a model to us. It is implied that you and I can embody her self-sacrifice. In doing this, we ignore her plight, and we deceive ourselves. Who would want to be this widow? Who desires to be alone, destitute, and dependent? We are happy to admire her sacrifice. But we would never imitate it. Sure, we give up portions of what we have, after making certain calculations. We give while managing the risks. More often than not, we let go of what we have only with guarantees in place, only after establishing fair principles, or with the promise that our names will be etched in stone.

This story might not be about sacrificial giving. It might be about learning the truth about ourselves. After all, we can be pretty good at ignoring the widows in our lives. We do not want to dwell too much on their situation—or the situation of refugees, the poor, the homeless, the abused and so forth. To dwell on their situation might remind us that—but for the grace of God, there go I! We don't like to feel guilty, so we turn away. Not only that. To dwell too long on the plight of the widow and other unfortunate ones might require us to make the same sacrifice that the widow did. And we don't want to confront that either.

Also, I think this story tells a truth about God. God sees right through our self-attentive ways, our tendency for self-preservation, our constant leaning toward anything that might build up the self.

What Jesus saw was a widow caught in the middle of systems vying for power and desiring power. The widow has no power and power is everything, isn't it?

People will do anything to maintain power, selling out to the highest bidder, even selling their souls to those who will secure their best seats in church and their places of honor at banquets.

Because if you don't have power, it means others have more. If you do have power, it means others have less. And when you have been shaped by powerlessness, you often have little choice but to place your trust, your hope, your livelihood in God.

The widow's might is great indeed. A might greater than power. A might greater than the grandest buildings. A might greater than the most splendid displays that are mostly privilege and entitlement in disguise.

Because the widow's might is God's might -- a might known in love and loyalty. In giving and grace. And in dependence and dedication.

