

## NOVEMBER 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Deuteronomy 6:2-6    Hebrews 7:23-28    Mark 12:28b-34

Mark packs a lot in Jesus' last five days of life. He's not only in constant conflict with his enemies, he delivers some of his most important teachings. Today's pericope is a well-known example of the latter.

With 613 laws to choose from, Jewish scholars often debated which one should be at the top of the list. As a conscientious Pharisee, Jesus' response surprised none of those experts. He would have raised a few eyebrows only by combining numbers one and two. Everyone agrees a dedication to Yahweh must be the beginning of our relationship with Yahweh. But by joining the Deuteronomy 6 command to give oneself completely over to Yahweh with the Leviticus 19 law to love our neighbors as ourselves, Jesus is insisting his followers "concretize" their love of God in the people they daily encounter around them.

Both the historical and risen Jesus would find it difficult to defend our church's insistence we keep our eyes cast down and our faces looking straight ahead when we come back from receiving communion, never to be distracted by the people in our pew who would sinfully break our concentration on the Jesus now inside us. I presume the gospel Jesus would expect us to be looking all around especially at that time, checking on how God is now personified in everyone in front of, beside and behind us.

Probably the most important word in our Deuteronomy reading is "grow." Our sacred author takes for granted our dedication to God is an ongoing process. With that in mind, I presume most of our gawking around as children after receiving the Eucharist could legitimately be classified as a distraction. At that young age we're probably unable to experience the risen Christ in anyone occupying our pew, including ourselves.

We frequently need to be reminded that Christianity is a faith for adults, not children. Being another Christ demands a certain amount of maturity. (A priest friend often points out, "The historical Jesus played with children and taught adults; but today we Catholics usually teach children and play with adults!") We shouldn't think we're failures if some of our "youth" don't get it. As long as we're teaching the faith of Jesus correctly they'll eventually understand. I presume we adults don't appreciate our faith today in the same way we appreciated it twenty years ago.

But it's important to understand that our "prospering" also evolves. What gives us life and fulfillment constantly changes. Our values – and our rewards – are always on the move. A local radio personality frequently reminded his listeners that few fathers, on their deathbeds, wish they'd spent more time at the office. As time goes on, people – and our relationships with them – eventually become more important than things.

Perhaps that's why the author of Hebrews reflects on the permanence of Jesus offering himself for us. No matter what happens in our lifetime, his gift of himself is a constant. Unlike the Jewish priests he encountered during his earthly ministry, once Jesus engaged in sacrificing himself for us, he didn't have to do it over and over again. It's good for all people at all times. But because we've yet to share in his perfection, we're constantly expected to offer ourselves for others, every day of our imperfect lives.

Teilhard de Chardin discovered that the only thing on this planet that doesn't change is change. That's why we'd best listen to today's gospel pericope as often and as intently as possible. No matter what changes in and around us, we can be certain today's two laws aren't part of that change. They guarantee our evolution will always go in the right direction. Keeping them is the only way to eventually achieve perfection.

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# NOVEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>, 2018: THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

The vast majority of people hearing today's gospel pericope will get the wrong message; certainly not the message Mark's Jesus conveys.

From "time immemorial" religious preachers have employed this passage whenever they want their people to give to causes they're touting. Seems Jesus directly had them and their causes in mind when he pointed out a desperately poor widow in the Jerusalem temple who had just deposited her last two mites in the collection plate. "This poor widow," he says, "put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. They have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood." In other words, "Go and do likewise! Give till it hurts!"

There are several obvious problems with this interpretation, problems most of us don't see.

Notice the gospel Jesus never praises the woman, nor encourages his disciples to imitate her behavior. He simply wants people to notice what she did. No more than that.

But, in what context did he point her out? Since WWII, gospel scholars have stressed "redaction criticism." They're very interested not only in what Jesus says, but what happened right before or after he says it. What's the context of the verse? It's also important to notice how one evangelist changes – redacts - what a prior evangelist has written. Each is trying to convey his unique theology. If he weren't concerned with that endeavor, we'd have just one gospel: Mark's. One surfaces his theology in his redactions. (Just as people can surface my theology on clericalism by noticing I always redact the Eucharistic "And with your spirit" to "And with you.") Since Mark wrote the first gospel, we don't have to worry about redaction here. But we do have to worry about context.

Mark's Jesus is constantly concerned for the poor. But in today's pericope he's also concerned with how some of them became poor. The evangelist begins this passage not with the widow, but with a warning: "Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers." The gospel Jesus points out these revered functionaries use their "clerical" relationships with widows to eventually impoverish them. But not to worry; "I'll say one for you."

The impoverished widow is "exhibit A." Jesus wants all his followers to know these religious dignitaries have no shame. Even after they devour the woman's house, they even take her last two mites. Instead of caring for her, they continue to expect her to care for them. No wonder Jesus only lived six days after he arrived in Jerusalem. He's an immediate danger to the institution.

Mark doesn't just say the poor must defend themselves against the institution, he also wants the institution to know one of their main tasks is to help the poor . . . always.

Certainly the widow of Zarephath is to be praised for her generosity toward Elijah, and Yahweh is to be praised for his/her caring for her and her son. But on the other hand, the author of Hebrews couldn't have foreseen the day when Christian communities would actually have "sanctuaries made by hands" that needed to be cared for – often over the needs of the poor. The writer is impressed that Jesus, freely sacrificing himself for us, has stamped "no charge" on our receipt.

Institutional church finances will always be a problem. But if we actually create the very abomination Mark's Jesus refers to in today's gospel passage, we certainly have no idea how his/her risen presence should be redacting our lives.

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