

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Place an open bible at the center of your group with a lighted candle beside it.

LEADER: Our God keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, and sets captives free.

ALL: Gives sight to the blind, raises up those bowed down, loves the just, protects strangers.

LEADER: The fatherless and the widow, God sustains.

ALL: And calls us to continue this work on earth. Amen.

When Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, the temple and its courts become his daily teaching venue. In Mark's gospel Jesus immediately cleanses the temple by chasing out buyers and sellers. His actions rattle the authorities who fear the spellbinding impact of his teaching on the crowds. Jesus debates the questions of the day—Roman taxes, resurrection, laws.

In last Sunday's gospel a scribe asks, "Which is the greatest commandment?" Jesus' answer is still the daily prayer of Jews, the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel, the Holy One your God is one. You shall love the Holy One your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe agrees. Like

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

Jesus he values love of God and neighbor above making burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus praises the scribe's wisdom—to care wholeheartedly for each other.

This fall U.S. citizens have debated, questioned, listened to various points of view in choosing our president. The process wears many of us out as well as the candidates. Some debates simply seesaw between opposites, Either and Or, exhausting hope of agreement, let alone understanding others' convictions or taking time to identify where we might work together for our common good. Our responsibilities as citizens persist.

This fall Pope Francis gathered bishops and lay people from around the world in a Global Synod to engage in Conversation in the Spirit in the great halls of the Vatican. He envisions building a world-wide synodal process that invites the usually uninvited—lay people, especially women, youth,



people who are poor—to help guide the Church into true discipleship. Delegates have returned to their homes now to describe their hopes and progress, and some among us will continue to feel pain rather than pastoral compassion.

This Sunday, Jesus criticizes scribes who love long robes, the best seats, long prayers, others' respect, especially those scribes who consume widows' property. As he sits watching the crowd put money in the temple treasury, Jesus notices a widow put in two coins like pennies. He calls his disciples to notice. "She has put in more than all the wealthier people who give out of their abundance. She has given all she had, her whole livelihood."

- For what do you find yourself praying these days?
- How do you work for the common good in our country?
- How have you joined in the work of the Global Synod?



For a synodal Church
communion | participation | mission

GOSPEL



Jesus reflects on a widow's gift.

NARRATOR 1: Jesus was teaching in the temple.

JESUS 1: Watch out for the scribes. They like to parade around in their long robes, so that people greet them with respect.

JESUS 2: They choose the places of honor in the synagogues and the best seats at banquets.

JESUS 3: They treat widows unjustly but recite lengthy prayers. They will be punished for the way they live.

NARRATOR 2: Jesus took a seat in the temple courtyard opposite the treasury. He observed people putting money

into the collection box. Many rich people put in large amounts of money.

NARRATOR 3: One poor widow came and dropped in two small copper coins, worth about a penny each. Jesus called his disciples.

JESUS 1: I want you to observe that this poor widow gave more to the treasury than all the others.

JESUS 2: They gave from their loose change what they could spare.

JESUS 3: But she in her poverty gave the pennies she had to live on.



Mark 12.38-44

What do a widow's pennies ask of us today?

Mark's gospel places Jesus in the temple courts in the three chapters before his passion. There Jesus daily disputes controversial questions with learned teachers.

However, it is none of these leaders but a woman on the margins of her society who stands front and center in Jesus' eyes as a model of generous faith. Other Jews probably know more than she about the intricacies of the law. Others give more money. This woman supports the institution of the temple with its system of sacrifices and its hierarchy of priests with money she needs to live. With only a widow's meager

livelihood she acts nonetheless as a full member of the religious community. Mark deliberately juxtaposes the scribes' shallow concern with appearances and the widow's gift from the heart.

The scribes in this Sunday's gospel seem unable to penetrate the heart of the law. They like to benefit from their positions as respected teachers, even at the expense of powerless people like widows. Jesus warns people to beware of such self-centered, greedy teachers.

What happens when teachers ignore the core commandments of love of God and neighbor but promote external rules and regulations with rigor? Any legal system can close in to serve

its officials rather than those who need justice.

Jesus values authentic faith and piety. He values the widow's simple gift more than the scribes' long, public prayers. The widow is like Jesus himself, who gives his entire life for love of God and neighbor.

● What keeps communities of faith alive and relevant?

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his apostles, eyewitness believers, and followers preach and spread Jesus' good news around the Mediterranean area. Christians gather in house churches to hear about Jesus—his passion and resurrection, his teachings, his healings. Many become tellers of the story who live the teachings they tell and share in breaking bread together as Jesus asked. Forty years later Mark collects the cycles of oral traditions these first Christians handed on and writes the first gospel.

The nameless widow expresses her faith in God by giving to the temple. She doesn't ask as many of us might, "What will my two cents matter?" or "Will people make fun of how little I give?" Why does Jesus point her out to his disciples and to us? Because her gift is to the God of her faith. She gives all she has to God as Jesus does in his suffering and death. Her two cents and Jesus' actions travel time as story, as Word, which survives the temple's destruction.

When the Church needs reform, we can return to the gospel word and recommit to Jesus' teachings. As Christians, we appreciate the widow giving all she has just as Jesus gives his all in his ministry of healing and forgiving and dying at the hands of the Romans on the cross. The gospel calls us to give our faith and wholehearted commitment, our two cents, to bring love and mercy to our divided country and agonizing church.

● **When has your two cents proved valuable and renewing in your parish?**

The widow puts me in mind of Cynthia Bailey Manns, a delegate to the Synod from the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese. With her doctorate in spiritual direction, she works with adult learning in a local parish. Cynthia embodies wisdom. As a delegate she has spent past year sharing the Synod's work and inviting the lay people of the Church to persist and participate.

The process called Conversation in the Spirit gives each person time to speak followed by a brief quiet to hear within themselves what touches them. The next round is describing the imprint the Spirit delegates hear in each



voice. People back home know Dr. Manns has communicated the pain many Catholics feel—LGBTQ people, divorced and remarried people, transgendered, women called to be deacons.

In our time we feminists can't help but notice the widow. The three verses that tell her story are among the 57 verses about women in Mark's gospel, which has 660 verses. We can join Dr. Manns at the synod and the widow in the gospel to claim women's significance in a church that needs to do a far better job of hearing their voices and integrating their gifts.

- **What is your hope for a Church both global and synodal?**
- **What actions can you do to express your hopes?**



What do a jar and jug reveal about God?

Sunday's first reading tells the story of another widow and model believer. The gospel tells us nothing about the fate of the widow who gives money she needs to live on to the temple treasury. But the mother who uses her last bit of flour and oil to make cakes for the prophet Elijah, herself, and her son finds her jar of flour never goes empty and her jar of oil never runs dry.

A great drought has overtaken the northern kingdom of Israel, a drought Elijah has prophesied to King Ahab. Ahab wants to kill Elijah, so God sends Elijah to stay with a desperate single mother on the verge of starvation.

The brief seven verses of the widow of Zarephath's story richly reveal her character and relationship with the prophet. The God of Israel is foreign to this Canaanite widow. By her oath, "as the Lord your God lives," we see that the widow realizes that Elijah is a prophet

DO SOMETHING

● **Visit Catholic Relief Services (crs.org). Click on "Our Work Overseas," then click on "Where We Serve," where you will find a world map and list of countries where CRS serves. Click on countries that interest you for stories.**

of the God of Israel. She trusts Elijah, when he delivers the promise of his God to her. Her flour jar and oil jug, like St. Brigid of Ireland's apron or Strega Nona's spaghetti pot, will always hold enough for another guest and another day.

As one of the earliest prophets whose stories appear in the Hebrew scriptures, Elijah's powerful word shows us an ancient theology of prophecy. The word spoken is dynamic. A word spoken is a word done, a performative word.

Elijah doesn't fit most people's stereotype of the Old Testament prophet—one who predicts doom and destruction in the distant future. In this story Elijah delivers God's promise for the widow's near future. She takes Elijah at his word; she believes he speaks a word of God's power. The story holds up a foreign, single mother as a model of faith in God.

Elijah and the Widow

God sent the prophet Elijah to a widow in Zarephath during a drought. As he arrived at the gate of the city, Elijah saw a widow gathering sticks and called out to her, "Please bring me a small cupful of water to drink." She left to get it. "And please bring along a bit of bread," he asked.

"As the Lord, your God, lives," she answered, "What do you expect? I have nothing to eat. There is only a handful of flour left in my jar and a little oil in my jug. I was just collecting a couple of sticks, so I could go in and prepare something for myself and my son; when we have eaten it, we shall die."

"Do not be afraid," Elijah said to her. "Go and do as you propose. But first make a little cake and bring it to me. Then you can prepare something for yourself and your son. For the Holy One, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the Holy One sends rain upon the earth.'"

She left and did as Elijah had said. She was able to eat for a year, and he and her son as well; the jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, as the Holy One had foretold through Elijah.

1 Kings 17.10-16

- What does it take for a single mother to share her last bit of food with a crazed prophet on the run from an angry king?
- What do the full jar and jug symbolize?
- What criteria do you use to decide whether a person speaks for God?

You can listen to *Sunday by Sunday* now!

Beginning in Lent, *Sunday by Sunday* will also be a podcast. Pass the word to your plugged-in friends who would enjoy Sister Joan's weekly invitation to explore the Sunday scriptures.

PRAY

LEADER: Let us ask the Spirit to speak to us out of the reflections of our group. What is the Spirit asking of us as a group or parish? Who are the poor widows and single parents in our community? What systems need to be changed in order to enrich their lives and prevent perpetual emergencies from devouring their means?

Pause and talk about any actions the Spirit draws your group toward doing. Each person puts a penny beside the lighted candle as he or she identifies actions the Spirit is urging.

LEADER: Holy One, we treasure your promises.

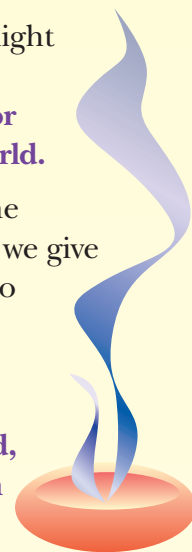
ALL: We meditate on your law.

LEADER: We delight in your word.

ALL: We work for justice in our world.

LEADER: Like the widow's pennies we give our best efforts to continue Jesus' mission in our world.

ALL: Loving God, we seek you with all our hearts.



Joan Mitchell, CSJ, editor of Sunday by Sunday, holds a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in New Testament from Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN.