

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle B
November 12, 2006

This is a brick. A brick, just like all the other bricks that make up the outside of Saint Mary's Church. Those others have been painted white for many, many decades, and not one of those bricks which was used to build up Saint Mary's Church is particularly descript. No one notices any one of them, no one will ever comment on how well-formed any one of them is made, or how well it is doing its job. This brick, though, is able to stand apart because it's not part of the structure. It enjoys independence, well, it would if bricks could actually enjoy anything. Standing alone, it gets identified and recognized as a brick. It can get moved around; it may still become part of some other structure, it's not held captive like those other bricks. But the truth is, that nobody is very likely to comment on it, any more than they are likely to comment on any one of the other bricks which make up this church. No one is likely to say that it's a beautiful brick; even though it stands alone, it commands very little attention. Those others, on the other hand, may not be admired individually, but they are frequently admired collectively. They are frequently photographed, collectively. Together, they really are beautiful. Maybe, alone, not one of them could ever be considered beautiful, but each one of *them* does get to be part of something which is.

In today's Gospel, Jesus draws a contrast between the scribes, who craved honor and recognition and who flaunted what they considered to be their generosity, versus a poor widow who came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. The equivalent, I suppose, of someone today tossing in a couple of dimes, maybe quarters; and while every little bit helps, and we welcome every quarter and every dime, the fact is that such a small amount won't make or break us. But this widow's contribution was significant; not only noted by Jesus at the time, but recorded in the Gospels, and now told throughout history. It was significant, not because of the difference it made to the upkeep of the Temple, but because of what it said about the widow, who could have just as easily held onto it, meager income which she had. As I meditated on this passage, I couldn't help but wonder, "what was she thinking?" I know that, even though I had wanted to give more, there were times before I began tithing when that basket would pass by me and I might toss one, maybe two, maybe five bucks in the plate; actually, usually more like two. And I knew when I did, I had going through my mind how much money I had to my name, and how many expenses I had in the foreseeable future. The Church has never asked us to give our very last penny, and I'm sure that the Temple wouldn't have required it either; so what was driving this woman, *whom it would seem couldn't afford it*, what was driving her to be so generous? Well, I think that she was so generous because even as she was contributing to the Temple, she was profoundly aware of what the Temple was contributing to her, and to her life. She could give everything she had, because she knew that the Temple mediated for her the divine presence, and her religion was what made her the person she was. I think she was so generous because, even as she tossed those coins in the

treasury, she realized that she was being a part of something bigger than her, more profound and with a more lasting impact on the world, much like the bricks that make up the building. But even more than being part of the Temple, she knew that the Temple had become a part of her; that her life wouldn't be the same and wouldn't mean the same without it. As she relinquished her last penny, she perhaps was thinking about how she loved that Temple and wanted to do something, even if it seemed relatively meager, to give her support to it; but even more than considering how much she loved the Temple, I think that the Temple reminded her that she was loved, reminded her of all the great things God had done for her people and for her, reminded her of his faithfulness and his providence towards her.

The Temple, for the Israelites, mediated the presence of God and was the center of worship and sacrifice; the same role is filled by the Church in the lives of Christians, and so we should examine ourselves, our actions and our motives, relative to this place where we encounter God. Am I contributing something—money, labor, time, prayer, anything—to this place, from which I receive so much in return? I come in here, my eyes and then my thoughts are drawn to heaven, to things that are holy, to redemption; if I think about it, I'm receiving so much in the way of graces and guidance. What am I giving back to show my gratitude? Am I a part of the effort of this assembly; our purpose being to worship God and reach out to others? Or, am I more like the brick sitting alongside the building, watching it all, taking it in, but never being one of the bricks that actually make the structure beautiful? And above all else, do I really love our Lord, whom I encounter here, in both his Word and his sacraments, and do I receive in turn the love he offers me? It's so easy to simply mark our time here in this place, do a mental checklist as we go through the Gloria, the readings, the homily, communion. But there is an exchange of love going on here, and we can be aware of that exchange if we offer the prayers sincerely, rather than routinely; make the responses thoughtfully, rather than automatically; and give real consideration to what God is achieving here in our souls, rather than watching watches to gauge how soon before we're done. We can be like the scribes, who made their appearance but who didn't really encounter the Lord, or like the poor widow, so drawn in by all that God offered her that she thought nothing of offering it back to him.

The Church is more than just an assembly; theologically, it is the Mystical Body of Christ, meaning that the Church identifies so closely with Jesus, that it is his graces being received, not hers; his name which we praise, his sacrifice we partake in. And so the overriding concern shouldn't be only "do we appreciate what we receive from the Church," but above all, "do we understand and appreciate all that we are receiving from Jesus here?" Do we really understand what *he* is contributing to our lives, each time we go to confession, each time we receive sanctifying graces in communion? Is Jesus a part of who I am? Identifying myself as "Christian" is easy enough, but does it come before all other labels; am I a Christian before I'm a Lincolnite, an American, in my case a pastor; for all here, before being a grandma, a parent, a student?

Where does my faith fit in with my personal hierarchy of identities? Do we understand, with each Mass, how much Jesus loves us? In the reading from Hebrews, we heard “now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.” Think of someone who really, really doesn’t like you; easier for some of us to come up with an example than others, granted. Then, imagine sacrificing for that person for just a week some of the things you love. We hated Jesus by our sins—and yet he still loved us enough to sacrifice himself so that those sins may be forgiven. When we look at that crucifix—how can we ever be like those scribes, who measured carefully their so-called generosity, concerned not with *not giving enough*, but careful rather not to give what they thought was too much. We can never return Jesus’ love too much, because he held back nothing in saving us.

The widow in the story from the first book of Kings believed that her provisions were soon to run out, but they did not run out, because that flour and oil represented God’s care for her, which was not spent, nor would it ever nor will it ever be spent for those who are faithful to him, and who live in him. The poor widow in the Gospel trusted that God’s love would never run out on her; that if she came down to her last cent, God would still, somehow, take care of her and provide her needs. She didn’t give just 100% of what she had; I think she had a 100% understanding of what she was getting in return. I know that many people question what they’re really getting from the Church sometimes, question what they’re getting from Jesus. I think what they’re really not understanding, is what all Jesus is giving them. Jesus has contributed all he has, has done all that he can do, for our salvation, and he invites us now to be part of the structure which makes up his Mystical Body, which will be united with him on the last day. Understanding how much he gives us, how much he supports us, and how much he loves us, then, is the first step toward ensuring our place in his kingdom.

Copyright © 2006