

NOVEMBER 1ST, 2015: ALL SAINTS
Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14 I John 3:1-3 Matthew 5:1-12a

In order to properly understand our gospels, it's important to remember they were written two or three generations after the ministry of the historical Jesus. Contrary to popular opinion, they're not a compilation of notes taken by eyewitnesses to that ministry. The four evangelists and the communities for whom they wrote had the advantage of living and reflecting on the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst for 30 to 60 years. So when the gospel Jesus encourages his followers to do something, we presume his gospel followers already had been doing it for a long time before his words eventually appeared in written form. This is especially important to know when we hear passages like Matthew's beatitudes.

Instead of looking at these "blessings" as something Jesus' disciples could expect to experience in the future, this pericope is actually a reflection on what the gospel community has already experienced. When a person actually carried through on Jesus' command to "repent" - to turn one's value system upside down - he or she not only began to experience God (or the risen Jesus) working effectively in their daily lives, they also began to experience reality from a completely different perspective. What once brought sadness now brings joy; what once brought death now brings life. Poverty no longer just brings pain. It also makes us aware of God's presence in everyone we meet and everything we do. Making ourselves weak by showing mercy to others strengthens us by receiving parallel mercy from others. The only way to live a fulfilled, satisfied life is to hunger and thirst for those unique relations with others which God wishes us to develop. And when we end up being insulted and persecuted because of our "weird" behavior, we should always remember the future rewards which accompany such behavior.

But, why would anyone even start down such a difficult road? The author of I John provides a little hint about the motivation. Eventually, we all want to "be like God." We want to look at people and things as God looks at them; to create the special environment in which all God's people are intended to live. We simply long to go beyond the limits which this world imposes on us and our lives.

It's important to note, as the author of Revelation reminds us, that we're not "Lone Rangers:" we're not expected to develop this new lifestyle by ourselves. Lots of others have the same "seal of the living God on their foreheads." In our quest to experience God among us, we're joined by a "great multitude, which no one can count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue." That's why communities are an essential element in living the life the risen Jesus expects us to live. Left to our own "devices" we'd most probably turn tail and run the first time we encountered any serious problem.

The fact that the beatitudes, for instance, are found in two gospels is proof that by second and third generation Christianity they had become community - not just individual - experiences. Both Matthew and Luke's communities could reflect on what they'd all experienced when they tried to carry through on dying and rising with Jesus. Those experiences united them on the deepest levels of their lives. Though the two evangelists never seemed to have known one another, they and their churches could reflect on the same things: the common things which all other Christs encounter.

Perhaps our problem is that we're still looking for these "things" to take place in the future instead of living our lives of faith in such a way that we can experience and reflect on them right here and now.

NOVEMBER 8TH, 2015: THIRTY SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

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

I have it on good authority that we commit a biblical mortal sin if we proclaim the shorter version of today's gospel reading instead of the longer.

Few passages of Scripture are more misunderstood than today's gospel pericope, mainly because we often rip part of it out of the context in which Mark originally put it.

We preachers traditionally employ the story of the widow's mite when we're trying to raise money. It provides us with a terrific example of someone who gives all she has – "her whole livelihood" - to a religious institution. Yet Marcan scholars have been warning us for a long time not to use this narrative in that context. It originally conveyed a message at right angles to the message we're trying to convey.

First of all, notice – contrary to popular belief - that Jesus never praises this unfortunate woman for her overly generous donation to the temple treasury. Without making any judgment, he simply calls peoples' attention to what she's done. "This poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had . . ." He never says anything akin to, "Great going!" Never encourages his disciples to imitate her.

Second, note what the gospel Jesus says immediately before he draws his disciples' attention to the widow's donation. "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." In other words, "Beware of 'religious' people who, for the sake of religion, make poor people poorer, then get off the hook by promising to 'say one for you.'"

At this point the itinerant preacher presents exhibit A: a poor widow who digs herself deeper into poverty because of her perceived religious obligations. Nothing better demonstrates Jesus' complaint about the religious leaders' habit of "devouring the houses of widows" than this poor widow's actions at the temple's collection box. Now who's going to take care of her?

From Luke's Acts of the Apostles (and from other sources) we know that caring for widows was one of Christianity's earliest ministries. In a world that had no Social Security benefits nor any sort of survivor pension funds, many widows were instantly driven into poverty – and an early death - if they had no children to care for them. That's where the church quickly stepped in and provided that care.

In doing so, Jesus' followers were simply returning to their Jewish roots, as we hear in today's I Kings pericope. Yahweh's prophet Elijah responds to the widow of Zarephath's generosity by providing her and her son a jar of flour that didn't go empty and a jug of oil that didn't run dry. Yahweh's concern for the poor is demonstrated and carried out by the prophet's concern for the poor. In a world in which there was no concept of an afterlife as we know it today, salvation always revolves around the here and now. In such a context, this particular widow is the recipient of Yahweh's salvation.

Perhaps that's partially how we should hear the last line in today's Hebrews passage: ". . . (The risen Jesus) will appear . . . to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him." Knowing the background of our sacred authors, some of that salvation should always have something to do with getting rid of the anxiety which dominates the lives of the poor – long before they cross over into eternity.

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