

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

This falls into the category of “Kids say the darndest things”. Recently I visited all our Prep classrooms. In the 2nd grade the teacher introduced me as Father Eschbach. I asked the kids why I was called Father. A number raised their hands and I pointed to one little guy who was really excitedly waving his hand. He promptly said, “Because you’re old”. I knew I was walking in troubled waters, but I doubled down and asked why I was wearing this white collar. A sweet little girl didn’t even bother raising her hand, she simply announced, “Because it prevents fleas and ticks for up to six months.” Really, I don’t know when to quit when I’m behind. So I asked another little girl what she was doing. She said, “I’m drawing God.” I said, “Wow, that’s really great, but no one has ever seen God. We don’t know what God looks like.” She continued drawing and without even looking up, she said, “You will in a minute.” KIDS! AREN’T THEY GREAT!

The scribes we hear Jesus speaking about in today’s Gospel were the very influential teachers of the Law of God. They had great authority in the Temple. People were expected to follow their teachings to the letter. Here Jesus is telling the people, “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.

So far, that sounds kind of petty. The scribes were apparently full of themselves and somewhat hypocritical. But, hey, who doesn’t like to wear fine clothes and be treated with honor and respect? Who wouldn’t want the best seats in the house? There aren’t too many of us who would turn down a first class seat on a plane or a seat in the owner’s box at an Eagles game. Although I don’t see too many of you fighting to sit in the front pews here in Church.

It is Jesus’ next assertion that is the most troubling—“They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.”

One of the roles of the scribes was to write wills and deed properties. And some of them abused their position. When a man died, they would visit the widow under the guise of counseling her about settling her husband’s estate. In those days, a wife could not inherit her husband’s property or money, so it usually would be left to his sons who, of course, had the duty to care for their mother. These unscrupulous scribes, however, would pray long prayers and advise the widow that it was God’s will that she give the entire estate to the temple for the sake of her husband’s soul in the afterlife. After taking possession of the property, they would drive the widow and her children from their home, sell it, and keep the proceeds for themselves, leaving the widow and her family homeless. This was the despicable practice that Jesus was condemning in the strongest possible language, “They will receive a very severe condemnation.” One translation suggests they’ll be damned to hell (That sounds right to me. Oops, I didn’t really say that).

Of course, this wasn't the practice of all of the scribes. Most were reliable, trustworthy teachers of the Law of God. Just as today we have some clergy who have done despicable things that likewise need to be condemned and, as Jesus says, "will be punished most severely". But, again, most clergy today are honorable, reliable, and trustworthy servants of God and his people.

Our Gospel text then abruptly transitions to a different scene. Jesus moves from the Court of the Gentiles where He was teaching and condemning the religious leaders who take advantage of vulnerable people to the Court of the Women where the people presented their offerings. He sits and he watches. Many well-to-do people are dropping in gold and silver coins, but his attention zooms in on one poor, nameless, and probably homeless, widow who drops in two small coins. Lepta, they were called, the smallest bronze Jewish coin in circulation, worth only a few cents.

To his disciples, Jesus says, "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, her whole livelihood."

Jesus praises her, not just for her great generosity, but for her phenomenal faith in entrusting all she had to God. But what is disturbing to me in this passage is that she is probably one of those widows who was left homeless and penniless by the crooked scribes. But, when you think about it, it's also a hopeful sign.

This widow had every right to be angry at the religious authorities. They had robbed her; left her a homeless beggar; probably seeking shelter with resentful relatives or neighbors. She also could have been angry at God. It would have been very human for her to have issues with God, as well as with the Church. She could have blamed God for taking her husband away from her. Many of us, even for a time, felt God let us down when a loved one has died, especially when we had prayed for healing. She also could have been angry at God for her homelessness and her poverty. This happens a lot. People get angry at God for all kinds of things, great and small. Even some of the saints have gotten angry at God. I believe it was St. Catherine of Siena, whose carriage had gotten stuck in the mud, who, when she got out of the carriage, fell into a gooey puddle of mud, who raised a fist to heaven and shouted at God, "No wonder you have so few friends, if this is the way you treat them."

Life can sometimes be harsh, and God seems nowhere to be found. Getting angry with God is a pretty normal experience. But I have learned that our God's love is great enough to handle our occasional tizzy fits.

The amazing thing actually is that there are so many people who have been hurt by life or hurt by the Church who do not transfer their feelings of anger to God. They may have felt that way at one time in their life, but somehow their faith has conquered their feeling of

perceived betrayal. With time they have both remembered and discovered that God is the best friend they could have in a time of hurt.

Certainly this widow in the temple that day was such a person. Even though she may have been victimized by a representative of the Temple, she hung in there. She was faithful to her commitment. She didn't let her issues with the church get in the way of her trust in God, even literally down to her last penny. It is that faithfulness and trust that earns her the praise of Christ.

Likewise, the widow we hear of in our first reading today. Elijah finds her gathering sticks for the last meal she and her son will have to eat, after which they will die of starvation. I know that sounds so far from our reality until you look at pictures of those starving people suffering from famine in Africa, or the refugees pouring out of Syria. Such continues to be for tens of thousands of our sisters and brothers in too many places in the world today.

But Elijah seems to ask this widow for the impossible. He tells her to feed him first, and then prepare something for herself and her son. He calls her to trust God with the little she has so that God may multiply her supply of food and drink. She does and the Scripture tells us, "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..."

What this tells us is that when we are faithful to God, he is faithful in his promises to us. It also points out that we will never outdo God in generosity. It reminds us that though we sometimes encounter or hear of even terrible evil in the church, it is God's to condemn and punish. Like the widow of the Gospel, we will receive the praise and the favor of God in remaining faithful in our commitment. And like the widow of Zarephath, our blessings will overflow as we offer truly sacrificial gifts to him, not just out of our excess, but of our very sustenance. These are the offerings that give glory to God. These are the gifts that He blesses and multiplies, as Jesus said, "30, 60, 100 times over".