

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
November 8, 2009

Readings: 1 Kings 17:10-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Go All In for Jesus

I think I have shared with you before the story of my call to be a deacon. Being a deacon was not something that I ever thought about or aspired to. I really didn't know anything about deacons, or what they did, when I heard the call driving down I-75 that day. I never really gave a lot of thought about what I was getting myself into when I said yes to God and started taking classes at the seminary and then entered into the formation program. The reality didn't fully hit me until I was having a discussion with a young engineer at work one day. He was asking me about the classes and the formation for being a deacon. And then he said, "Boy, are you lucky. You're going to have the best seat in church, sitting up next to the priest in front of all the people." He was envious of what he thought would be a great honor. I, on the other hand, became immediately squeamish. I had been on autopilot and hadn't really stopped and considered that I would have to be on display in front of everyone every week. I am an introvert, and the thought of getting up in front of a congregation didn't seem like an honor; it was a very scary proposition. The Holy Spirit has given me the strength to overcome my fears, but they're still there, especially when I'm in a new situation away from the friendly congregation here at Sacred Heart.

In our gospel Jesus tells the people to beware of those scribes that seek out the places of honor at the synagogues, that is those seats and positions that face the people. Those scribes had a mentality similar to that of my young friend. They were concerned with receiving honor and recognition, not with helping the people. To compound matters, there was a secondary reason for the scribes to want to gain recognition. The scribes were lawyers of sorts. When a man died, the scribes would be charged with helping the widow settle the estate, and of course they received a commission. Being recognized as a holy and pious scribe meant that one would get more of these estate settlements and enjoy a lucrative career. They didn't have the intention of helping widows; they had the intention of helping themselves. These scribes were deceitful. They hid their true intentions behind pious public practices.

We can't always know people's intentions; we only see their actions. But God knows what's in our hearts and we will be judged accordingly. Jesus points to the example of the poor widow to demonstrate the difference between actions and intentions. Many rich people visibly placed large sums into the treasury, but the poor widow put in only a few pennies. Yet she made the greatest gift. The rich gave from their excess; it wasn't a big sacrifice. They would still be rich after their donation. They would not suffer. The poor widow on the other hand put her complete trust in God. For those who play poker or watch poker on TV, she went all in. She bet on the reality that there is a loving God, and she put all her chips into the pot. She placed the ultimate bet that put her faith in God ahead of her very existence on this earth. The others just made a safe bet; one they could recover from if they were wrong about placing their trust in God. They placed a lot of chips in the pot for sure, but they knew that they would still be comfortable in this world.

In our first reading, God makes a promise to the widow through the prophet Elijah. He says: ***“The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.”*** And God kept His promise. God promises us eternal life in heaven with Him if we put His ways ahead of the ways of the world. He will keep His promise, but are we able to do our part? Are we able to put our complete trust in Him? Are we able to push all our chips into the pot; to go all in? Or do we want to make sure we have the things of this world? Do we hold back enough chips to ensure our security and comfort on earth? Are we concerned with receiving honor and recognition, as if they really matter in the grand scheme of things? What will be the value of that honor one hundred years from now?

Our desire for security and material comfort is a constant test of the strength of our faith. And our pride and egos present a real test for the strength of our faith. They are not easy tests to pass. The more we have the more difficult the tests. As Jesus told a few weeks back, ***“It is easier for a camel to pass through (the) eye of (a) needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*** What are your riches that hold you back? Do they interfere with your ability to go all in for Jesus?

Deacon Joe Hulway