

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time – November 10-11, 2018

- Today [this weekend] we are commemorating the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I.
- Last year, I was in Belgium to commemorate the beginning of the Battle of Passchendaele in the summer of 1917.
- My wife, Nancy, and I visited the Menin Gate in Ypres and we found inscribed on its walls with thousands of other names the name of her great uncle who had died in that battle and whose body was never recovered.
- We also visited Tyne Cot Cemetery, the largest of the British military cemeteries, filled with thousands of tombstones, many of which had inscribed on them “Known only unto God”.
- So many had given their lives in that battle, and the many other battles of the First World War.
- And many of us here today owe our own lives to those who survived the carnage to return and have children. My grandfather fought in the First War and I owe my existence in part to him.
- It is impossible to think of what more someone can give than their own life, or survive and give life to others.
- Today’s readings are also about giving, not quite life itself, but perhaps something close to it. They speak to us about giving itself and how God sees our giving.
- Giving is such a simple, commonplace action. It is a first cousin of the “helpers” Roshene Lawson spoke about in her reflections last weekend.
- These are things we learn about and do from a very young age. And the more we learn and do them, the better we become.
- The problem is, we sometimes forget what we learned at a young age and become more focused on ourselves or fearful of falling into need. We become attached to things and lose sight of what has real value.
- This is what the readings are speaking about today. The first reading and the Gospel are about people who have very little, and yet give what they have to someone else.
- This defies normal behaviour. You would expect someone who is down to their last dollar or crust of bread to hang on to it and try to make it last as long as possible. Why would they give it away?
- Perhaps because the less they have the less they are attached to, and the easier it is to give. And maybe there is something precious in the act of giving that they are entitled to as much as those who are wealthy.
- The irony of wealth is that so often the more you have, the more difficult it is to part with it. And yet, everyone must inevitably part with their wealth. You can’t take it with you.
- Both readings speak of people who have suffered one of the most catastrophic losses one can imagine: the loss of their spouse.

- And in Jesus's time, the loss of a husband was especially tragic because women were so economically dependent on the male members of their families. Respectable women did not work outside the home.
- And when their husbands died, they depended on the kindness of their families. They were the poorest of the poor.
- Why then does Elijah ask a widow for food? Why does a widow put two small coins in the treasury?
- Could it be that what we see as value or worth is illusory? Measures of real wealth and prosperity are not found in the number of dollars or the fullness of the pantry.
- Rather, as in Dickens' Christmas Carol, the Cratchett's are the wealthy ones and Scrooge is desolately poor with all his wealth and ghosts.
- The real value of a gift is not measured in how much it is, but rather in how much it means to the giver.
- This lines up with Jesus's other radical call to discipleship: leave everything you own and follow me. Let go of temporal things and seek wealth elsewhere, in giving, in helping, in making a difference in the lives of those around you.
- I would like to conclude with a little story about some modest success I have had in seeking this kind of wealth.
- I was in a coffee shop near here about a month ago, the Happy Goat just down the street on Wilbrod. I was in a line to order my coffee. The coffee shop was busy and it was taking some time.
- Finally, I noticed an elderly woman at the front of the line. She was rather out of place in a coffee shop full of university students, but there she was ordering coffee and something to eat.
- She finished at the cash with a coffee, a muffin, a cane and only two hands. Something moved me to get out of the line and ask her if she needed a hand (literally). She said she did and I carried her coffee and muffin to a table for her.
- Then she gave me a wonderful smile as she thanked me.
- I have thought about that moment many times since then. It makes me feel good to think of it. It adds to what you might say is my social wealth.
- In retrospect, I realize I didn't do something for her so much as she did something for me in letting me carry her coffee.
- The giving in this little story is very small and does not compare to so many other examples, including the giving we remember today.
- My grandfather was proud of having served in the First World War and that sense of worth about his contribution helped move him to return from that devastation with hope and start a family. That's the giving I remember today.

JMK