

The Widow and the Tax Collector

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The prophet Elijah has been proclaiming a difficult message for the land of Israel. In fear of the authorities he hides by a brook but it runs dry. This drought represents that there is no accepted prophesy in the land. He goes to a foreign land at the direction of God to a widow whom God has chosen to care for the prophet. She is elderly, alone, has one son, and is not of Elijah's faith and does not know him. She is but a widow on the outskirts of a town gathering sticks to prepare one meal for her son and herself before they die. Elijah encounters her as God's designation or destination for him, asks her for a cup of water, and then calling after her, a bit of bread. She tells him she has only a handful of flour in her jar and a little oil in her jug. Elijah the prophet asks for an act of trust in God that she first bake a little cake and bring it to him and then something for herself and her son, promising her that the God he believes in will not let the jar of flour go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry. She does as he bids her to do and for a year that jar and that jug feeds the three of them.

In our college education, hopefully, we all read the T.S. Eliot poem "Preludes". It ends with the lines:

"Wipe your hands across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots."

I have always thought he was alluding to this biblical story. Who are, I ask us and I ask you on this commencement from your law school weekend, who are the "ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots", the widows with one son we meet on the edges of our cities? Are they the homeless, or the elderly impoverished, or widows afraid to go out in their neighborhoods, or the uninsured, or frail women in our care facilities depleted of all resources and living on Medicaid, or the defrauded, or our working immigrants having a hard time to put two sticks together? The widow of Zarephath was asked to trust. These, too, are asked to trust—certainly in God—but also in you who know and protect and defend their rights and hold in your hands the laws of our common good meant to protect them. You are, in effect, the prophets of God for justice. They must trust in God but you have been sent by God to be the assurance of their dignity, their respect, and their human wellbeing. May their trust in you mean that the jar of flour and the jug of oil of your special service of, and care for, them never end or run dry and that you too with them may be fed and flourish in your own need.

In the story from the gospel we find someone you will likely meet in your vocation, a tax collector, the personification of the IRS of his day. His name is Zacchaeus. He is very short—how ironic that may be because don't all tax collectors feel they are short in their revenues? He is a curious man, he is seeking something, he is not satisfied. He hears that Jesus of Nazareth is approaching through his town of Jericho and the crowds are gathering to see him. Knowing he

has no chance to see this prophet through the crowds, he climbs a sycamore tree along the street. (We Jesuits of Seattle U. had a great Jesuit friend who worked here for 45 years. His name was Fr. Bill LeRoux and he was not quite five feet tall but made up for it in any crowd with a big voice. He hated this passage of the gospels because it was about the too-short man up a tree. He avoided preaching on the story at all cost!) To Zacchaeus' great surprise he doesn't just see Jesus the prophet, but Jesus stops, looks up, and sees him perched in the tree, sees how eagerly he is seeking something, calls him down and chooses his house for where he will dine with Zacchaeus, his family, and his friends. Jesus declares: "Today salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus, too, is a descendent of Abraham, though you do not treat him as one, and I have come particularly for people like him for I have come to save those who have been lost."

From this gospel story, let me ask us, and especially you on this weekend of commencing from law school, who are the Zacchaeuses of our day, of your lives and careers? Are they those not literally but figuratively up a tree? Are they the ones who have been shunned by our society, the economically and culturally disinherited? Are they those not as big as others but rather little ones seeking justice? Are they those in our day trying to see a city and a country of true freedom and inclusion; those eager to welcome us into their lives, their houses, their families, their friends, where we would not otherwise go? Think of your own career as being crowded, being hemmed in by so many who want your time and attention. Stop, and look up, and find the one seeking you and eager to welcome you into his or her life. See who is seeking you and what you have, seeking what they need and want. Again, as in the first story with the "ancient women gathering fuel in vacant lots", may you too be fed and befriended as Jesus was by Zacchaeus and his family and friends. Are you by any chance needing and wanting this new company of welcome and does your law degree and career allow you this special joy?

Two stories: both about prophets—Elijah; and more than a prophet, Jesus. Both asking us whether there will be prophets in our land in our day. Two stories: one about trust in God, even if God is unknown or unfamiliar; and the other about God made known and quite familiar in Jesus of Nazareth who wants to be welcomed in our lives and work and homes. Ultimately, two stories in your Baccalaureate Law School Mass suggesting how your vocations in the law can be for others whom our society ignores and rejects, and by being so, be a vocation of God working through you with God's people with justice, compassion, and love.