

32nd SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

St. Mark 12:38-44

On the 5th of July, 1902, Maria Goretti, an eleven-year old girl was alone sewing in the house that her family shared with another family. One of that family, a twenty-year old man named Allesandro went into the room and grabbed Maria and demanded that she give in to him. Maria fought the man, screaming for him to stop and crying that this was a mortal sin. Allesandro choked Maria but still refusing to succumb to him he stabbed her eleven times. She ran for the door but he caught her and stabbed her three more times. She was found by her mother and father and rushed to hospital. Twenty hours later she was dead. Just before she died she said that she forgave the man and prayed that he would one day be in heaven. Allesandro was captured shortly afterwards and was sentenced to thirty-years in prison. For years he remained unrepentant and even told of dreams in which Maria appeared to him and gave him lilies but which burned-up in his hand. After a visit from the Bishop he began to consider what he had done and the eternal consequences of his actions. When he was finally released from prison he visited Maria's mother and begged that she would forgive him. Maria's mother said that if her daughter had found the humility to forgive him then she must do the same. The next day Allesandro and Maria's mother attended Mass and received Holy Communion side-by-side. In 1950 Maria's mother and Maria's brothers and sisters attended the canonisation of Maria; the first mother ever to see her own child declared a Saint. At that same ceremony was Allesandro. He would die in 1970, having prayed daily to Maria, the girl he killed. A feminist writer said of Maria and her mother: "[They] have become models for the only education that matters: how to live and how to die."

In 1995 in Illinois in the United States, a man went on trial for drink driving. He drove his car into two people walking by the road and he killed them both. The case was quickly settled as the man pleaded guilty and accepted the sentence imposed. The man's mother went with him to stand with him in the court room. At the end of the trial another woman walked up to the man's mother. She introduced herself as the mother of one of the boys who had been killed. She said to her, "I just want you to know that I know you must be in great pain, and that I feel for you. I know your son didn't mean to do it. I just wanted you to know that." That mother had made a choice amidst the agony of her own grief to not be enslaved to anger and resentment and vengeance. Out of the depths of her despair she reached out to the mother of the man who had killed her son and who herself now suffered the imprisonment of her own son.

In the two stories I told, both of those mothers are reflections of the widow whom Elijah visited in the first reading and the widow of whom our Lord spoke in the Gospel: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

We all have the choice to make between anger and forgiveness. Forgiveness is never easy because it doesn't come from human strength but from divine strength. Often it feels that forgiveness is weakness or not taking the stand that we should, especially when we have been hurt by someone who doesn't even feel the need to be forgiven. Sometimes it feels that if we forgive then we have let go some of our control because anger and resentment and vengeance can make us feel as though we are strong and in control. Forgiveness can make us feel vulnerable and maybe even as though the abuse continues. But love is vulnerable. Christ is vulnerable. He places Himself in our hands at every Mass. A lack of forgiveness or the lack of a desire to forgive is not a matter of strength but of enslavement. We make of ourselves slaves to the power of those who have hurt us. Forgiveness is freedom because we expose ourselves to the grace of the Holy Spirit and the courage that says that we will not be slaves any more.

If the Holy Spirit is to do any good within us then we have to rid ourselves of all those things that fill us up and don't allow room for His grace to live. Then we make ourselves poor, spiritually poor, and we become rich because He has everything gives us everything in return.