

The elections this past Tuesday resulted in a changing of the guard in both the House and the Senate. The majority turned from Republican to Democratic control. Voting exit poles and election results were announced well into the night, with some hotly contested races not being conceded until much later on the following day. The peaceful elections that this country enjoys were celebrated in the various campaign offices, and the cheering and revelry brought to mind the victory parties and inaugural balls that will be formally planned for the winning candidates.

God has gifted one of my friends with some amazing talents, and he designs some of the most exquisite ball gowns that have been seen at several inaugural dinners. It is remarkable that even at functions such as these, the press entices our interests in what the new governor or senator wore. If it is her spouse who won the election, then our newspapers and television reports are full of commentaries on whether the new congressman's wife wore a Badgely Mischka or a Dennis Beard gown. We almost get a feeling of the red carpet treatment, and I often expect Joan and Melissa Rivers to show up and render their opinions on how everyone looks, as the dignitaries exit their limousines.

Our attention paid to the importance of how people look has been fueled by the fashion industry and the press' vying for our interest in their products. In this new era of up-to-the-minute reporting on who wore what and who sat next to whom in what section of Radio City Music Hall can become so overwhelming that we might forget what is really at stake, namely the issues proposed by each candidate. Said another way, we may overlook what the politicians or new celebrities are carrying on the inside; what is going on in their hearts?

A clever advertiser picked up on the controversy of walking the red carpet. In the commercial, the male or female celebrity gets out of their limousine and is immaculately dressed. As the person starts to walk toward the entrance to the awards show, there is a running

commentary on how fabulous they look. The list of the individual's accomplishments is read by the commentator until her or she gets to the announcement of an incredibly high number that is the celebrity's cholesterol count. At this point in the ad, the person trips and falls on the red carpet. The crowd lets out a loud gasp as if to say "is that what you have on the inside?" If the question were to be asked of a politician it might be "is that how you voted on that important issue and you expect me to re-elect you to office? If that is where you stand, who can I trust to take care of me?"

Our Scripture readings this morning raise up similar themes for our meditation. Naomi was concerned about the welfare of her daughter-in-law Ruth, who had remained with her after she too was widowed. Together, the women subsisted on whatever Ruth could glean at the threshing-floor of their kinsman Boaz. The two were barely sustained by Ruth's work, and while Naomi was a member of the family, she was not receiving any justice from her relatives. They were not taking care of her needs, much less those of her young, widowed daughter-in-law. Naomi's kinsfolk were not behaving according to their cultural mores because it would have been acceptable for Boaz to ask for Ruth's hand in marriage. He simply did not act.

So Naomi encouraged her daughter-in-law to bathe and perfume herself, put on her best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor and wait to see where Boaz goes to sleep. Her following instructions call for Ruth to take the drastic measure of baring his lower parts, to which the Bible euphemistically refers as his "feet", and lay down next to him. Well! When he woke up the next morning, Boaz found himself in quite a compromising position. He had been exposed and had nothing to hide. Boaz had no other option but to do justice to this foreign woman, and thereby to his kinswoman Naomi. Boaz and Ruth got married and had a son, and the women in the village rallied around Naomi and rejoiced with her, giving the baby a name.

Naomi took good care of her new grandson, Obed. Gee, the things women had to go through to get some justice!

While women featured prominently in our Old Testament narrative, men are the subject of discussion when we meet Jesus and his disciples. Jesus was sharing a teaching moment with his disciples. He admonished them to watch out for the scribes who liked to dress up in long, luxurious robes and to be recognized and greeted in a respectful manner when they were out in the marketplaces. Jesus also spoke about how these same proud people liked to sit in the front row at the synagogue, and occupy the seats at the head of the banquet table. Jesus' indictment against the scribes spoke of them as devouring the houses of widows. He went further, saying that they used long, elaborate prayers with complicated theological language so that they would look holy and righteous. The reward for this behavior that Jesus pronounced for the scribes was that they would receive the greater condemnation for their problematic and pompous piety.

Jesus continued to teach his disciple and another teaching moment arose when he sat down across from the treasury. He observed many rich people coming by and putting large sums of money into the offering box. All the wealthy people came along and offered loads of money in front of all the people who were present. When a poor widow approached the treasury she placed two copper coins into the collection. It was all that she had and Jesus summoned his disciples and gave them a comparison between what the rich people had given and what the women had offered at the temple. Jesus placed the larger value on what the widow had given to God than what the very wealthy, in their abundance, had dropped in the treasury.

Be very sure that Jesus was not condemning the offerings that the rich people were making. Rather it was what was on the inside, what their purpose for giving large sums of money was and the manner in which it was done. Jesus was also concerned about the scribes'

self-importance and the blatant disregard for the widows and orphans that lived among them.

Piety not only involves prayerful lives and giving of alms, but also calls for our engagement in the lives of the disenfranchised. We are called to make a difference in their experience of God's justice right here, right now. Those who are able must embody God's justice to this hurting and broken world.

What does God want from us, what does Jesus require of us? The prophet Micah tells us just what the Lord has told us: that we are to do justice, loving kindness and to walk humbly with our God. Using this advice from Micah, let us unpack what we mean when we talk about Robes, Renown and Recovery.

There are a lot of stereotypes that have to be broken about women and some men, as well. For instance, not too many people can understand why I, as a woman, love American football. That is not a stereotypical thing for women. But, Sunday afternoons in the fall...oh, forgive me Lord! Okay, I have been exposed, nothing to hide now. However, I must admit that I do fit one of the stereotypes and that is that I love new clothes. While that may seem like a fairly harmless thing, there is the issue about an awareness of who makes the clothes that I love to wear and what are their conditions of work. The National Labor Committee compiled a 23-minute documentary titled Zoned for Slavery that speaks about child labor in the sweatshops that have been set up in South American countries such as Guatemala and Mexico. The documentary depicted young teenage girls who were forced to work rather than go to school. They endured physical abuse and were forced to be injected with medication that would induce abortions incase they were pregnant. This committee's campaign was so successful that it got the clothing company the Gap to change its international labor practices. Now the Gap is involved with singer Bono's RED campaign to raise funds for AIDS drugs for people in Africa.

Why is it that we are concerned about our appearance? One of course must be well groomed, but do we always have to wear the latest Tommy Hilfiger or Kate Spade apparel? Who are we trying to impress? There was a talented pianist who was born in Allis, Wisconsin. He would give wonderful performances, and would often stop mid-way during his show to show off his latest jacket or fur coat and would ask the audience to guess how much it had cost him. Does anyone know who I am talking about? Yes, Wladziu Valentino Liberace. As a child growing up in my country of exile, Zambia, I didn't much care for his showing off about how many diamonds were on his new jacket and what it cost him. Somehow I was more interested in finding out how many people he could feed or how many children he could afford to adopt and rescue from the refugee camps that seemed full to capacity with displaced persons. Even at that young age it seemed unjust to me that someone like Liberace, who had the means to alleviate suffering, was busy showing off rather than adopting an orphanage by pledging financial support like Madonna did in Malawi. Let's save that conversation for some other time. Do you suppose Jesus would have called him out about his behavior, saying, "look at your sister Teresa of Calcutta.?" Mother Teresa donned simple vestments, nothing flashy.

Beloved in Christ, it is not only what is on the outside that people look at, but also what is on the inside that matters in God's economy. Just as Ruth uncovered Boaz' feet, the truth has to be brought to light in many of the matters in which we are involved in order for justice to be carried out. We have just celebrated Veterans' Day, and yet the stigma of war still lingers. The British Broadcasting Service or the BBC reported on the uncovering of a mass grave in Srebrenica that contained 100 bodies. Whoever was responsible for that massacre thought that they were using the cloak of earth to cover up their iniquity. The unrelenting quest for the truth has revealed this horror and the tireless arms of justice will continue to reach for those who committed this crime.

The cries for justice also come to us loud and clear in the voices of the small victims of the Iraqi war: Iraqi children. ABC World News reported on the increasing number of people, particularly children, who are suffering from post-traumatic distress. The reportage showed a young boy who was so severely depressed, crying incessantly and not playing with the other children. He had found the body of his father on the side of the road, with his head severed. The child's trauma has prevented him from returning to school, and when asked why he would not go to school his response to the reporter was "because I can't".

While we may be able to keep up appearances for the Jones and all of our neighbors, none of us can withstand the scrutiny of God's judgment. We might be dolled up to the nines in the best outfits ever made, but haute couture will not do. For you and I will stand before the Judge and our whole lives will be uncovered, exposed and bared before the King of Kings. Therefore, let us not be hesitant in seeking for justice our fellow kinsfolk and U. S. citizens, but rather let us be proactive in doing justice and showing loving kindness even to the stranger, the foreigner who dwells in our borders, crosses our borders or lives in poverty in another country.

The other roles to which all of us here today are called, is to be as grandmothers to one another. The women who rallied around Naomi and her new grandson Obed, played their parts in nurturing the baby, for in naming a little child one takes on the role of caregiver to that wee soul. Thatcher and Wyatt were named by their parents, but we have all witnessed with baptism and have promised to provide them with spiritual nurture. We have become Godparents.

Naomi's life was redeemed or recovered through Obed, and Jesse and David. Brothers and sister, you and I need not despair. We can count on is this: that the saving grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient to redeem and recover us.