

32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time “Charity and Grace”

Fr. Frank Schuster

I find it interesting that this Gospel reading of the impoverished and yet generous widow always comes to us at a time when we discuss sacrificial giving in our parish community. And yes, her bold witness of giving from her poverty to the temple in juxtaposition of the wealthy giving from their surplus is most worthy of note and should challenge us. I was blessed however to run across Bishop Barron’s homily for this weekend and I am so glad I did because he opened up a deeper spiritual truth that this Gospel is trying to tell us.

You see, both the widow in our Gospel reading and the widow in our first reading from the Book of Kings represent souls who have hit rock bottom. If you were a widow back in those days, you were in trouble because there simply weren’t the kind of social nets that we have today. Malnutrition and starvation were common fates. And so the bible constantly calls us as a People of God to watch out for widows, orphans and anyone who is impoverished. One of the purposes of the Temple treasury was to do just that. And we do well at that as Church today and we must always be challenged to do more.

However, there is a huge incongruity in both our first reading and Gospel reading in that, when these two women have hit rock bottom in life, it is exactly then that they are called to give generously and to be charitable. It doesn’t make sense. The first reading recounting Elijah’s interaction with the widow of Zarephath is almost comical if it weren’t so tragic. The widow tells Elijah that she only has enough flour and oil for her and her son to have one last meal before they die. And so Elijah tells her to bake him a cake first. This seems rather cruel looking at this with modern eyes. However, with eyes of faith, this makes every sense in the world.

Bishop Barron points out that sometimes it is only when we have hit rock bottom in life when our egos will finally allow God to visit us and offer us grace. And when he visits us, the medicine he gives us, the remedy for all our problems, is the challenge to give and to be charitable. You see, Barron points out that when we constantly order our lives to “take” rather than to “give”, the things we fill our bellies with or the possessions we fill our houses with, nothing will ever ultimately satisfy. We will always want more. And so, Jesus mocks the scribes showing off their newest fancy robes and only giving the Temple treasury a token from their surplus. Jesus instead turns the disciples’ eyes towards the witness of the impoverished widow. It is in that moment when we have hit rock bottom, when we give even the little we have away, it is in that moment when our hearts can be opened and ordered to what satisfies us most, namely a total reliance on God.

When this happens we discover a spiritual truth. If we are at our wits end and need others to show us grace we need to give grace to others first. If we feel unloved and need others to love us we need to give love to others first. If we feel joyless and desire joy in life, and who doesn’t, we need to give joy to others first. We need to be a conduit of joy to others to be joyful ourselves. That is how grace happens. We can only truly feel God’s love in our lives when we come to the truth that God loved us first. The word grace in fact finds its root in the word gift. The love God gives us cannot be taken. It must be given. The widow of Zarephath had to first

make Elijah a cake in her poverty before the flour and oil jars to be miraculously filled. The widow in the temple gave the little she had and her prayers were answered. If we try to go through life thinking we can take God's love for ourselves somehow, or fill our lives idolatrously with things that are not of God, we will end up very disappointed. If we freely receive God's love and freely give it away to others every chance we get, we will never run out.

And so, the readings this weekend are perhaps not really about money at all. The readings this weekend instead shed light on how to find joy in this life and have it abundantly. You know who perhaps understood this best? Saint Francis. Let me conclude with his prayer. Pray it with me if you would like, especially if life feels like rock bottom for you right now. Here is the remedy:

“Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.”