

Thirtysecond Sunday of Ordinary Time

Widow's Generosity

November 11, 2018

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Today we have the story of two widows. Both are poor. But both perform acts of great generosity. This might seem counterintuitive but it is not unusual for the poor tend to be far more generous than the wealthy. After all they know what it is like to be in desperate straits. They know their own vulnerability to the vicissitudes of fortune, that there but for the grace of God go I. And they know how a little help can make all the difference.

Generosity is really like the poor widow's miraculous jar of flour and jug of oil that never runs out in today's first reading. The more I give, the more I find I have to give, the more I learn how to give in ways that actually do help. Not help everyone, I am not Christ. But I can help Christ help others, by doing what I can for those I can help.

Its often thought that giving is altruistic. But I think that is not a good way of looking at it. Thinking of giving as altruism puts the focus on what it costs me, leaving the recipient anonymous and our motives impartial. Understanding giving as selfless altruism makes it appear heroic, but also less human. With us humans, we give to whom we know. Our loved ones, our kids, our parents. Is that altruism? Or isn't it more, like taking care of ourselves? Our extended selves, ourselves insofar as our self is a fabric of interwoven relationships with other selves. Isn't our giving more like knitting, as we give who we are extends further out beyond the confines of our own skin. Today's widows were not altruists. The first gave to the prophet she met and came to know, the second to the temple that she holds sacred, that gives her meaning and purpose.

You may have noticed that you are offered many opportunities to give in this parish. Not to the world, but to people we have a relationship with, or people we want to build relationships with. As a parish we give monthly to our local foodbank, to help them help our neighbors in crisis. We give to Dawn, to help her help kids with autism, and for her to help her help the families trying to help their child. We gave to the diocese because the diocese is part of who we are. We will be helping Char give presents to a few families with kids in our community who would otherwise not have much of a Christmas. And of course, Char is helping us help our neighbors, whose needs we don't know.

And we give to some untouchables in and from Chennai, India, not random faceless people out of our sense of altruism, but Indian dalit we know, and have come to know through our helping them help themselves, help their loved ones, as they go to school to learn how they can help their communities back home.

Giving isn't selfless. Its good for us. It grows our soul. It makes us magnanimous, literally large-souled. It makes us generous and compassionate, not just in the momentary act, but as part of what we are, part of what makes us us. When I tell people about the building of our church people are always amazed. A parish of 80 families, not 80 wealthy families, but across the economic spectrum, built a church twice as big as they needed for a million dollars. I reply, it was not luck. It was not because we just happened to have a bunch of selfless altruists. They approached it not like giving to charity but like building a deck on their house. People showed up to help whenever they could. We were helping ourselves as much as our fellow parishioners, for who we are extends to them, not least through our very building of this church. become part of who we are. We are not lucky, we are blessed by becoming blessings to one another.

The more we practice the fine art of giving, the deeper we enter into the wonder of God's own creative activity. For creation is itself God's greatest gift to each of us, the gift of ourselves to ourselves, But we are not a gift for ourselves alone. We are a gift meant to be shared.

During this month of November we remember our dearly departed, those who have gone before us and whose absence we still feel. What do we remember when we think of them? What do we miss when we pray for them? Probably not their wealth, or even their accomplishments. Those things seem memorable at the time, but they don't count for as much as may seem at the time. More likely its what they have given us, and not because we are selfish, but because through their gifts to us, and ours to them we have become part of one another. If they had not won their victories, someone else would have, but their gift to us; that is irreplaceable.

We don't need to save the world to save the world. But we can help Christ save it, one person at a time. As I like to quote from the sixteenth century Spanish mystic, Theresa of Avila. "Christ has no body but our body, no feet but our feet." In giving we become the body of Christ here and now.

