

Ordinary 32 11.1024

I shop at Publix at least once a week. People seem surprised to see me there. Sometimes they ask, "Father, what are you doing here?" Among the many responses I could give, I usually just say this, "you don't shop; you don't eat."

Often times, when I enter the store, I pass the customer service desk. As many of you know, that's the place you purchase Lotto tickets. I say "as you know" because I see a few of you there as I head into the store. When I look in your direction, some folks duck and cover. They turn away or look down. If our eyes meet, they might say, "Oh Father, if I win, I'll give 10% to the church." I must live among the unluckiest people in the world. The parish has seldom, if ever, received any Lotto windfall.

Now, I'm not preaching that playing Lotto is wrong. If you play and win, then good for you. Hoping to win, I'm sure you've thought about what you'd use that money for – paying off bills, buying a new car, going on a cruise or some other vacation. Or perhaps we dream of winning the Lotto because we're finding it difficult to buy groceries and make ends meet.

With that being said, let's turn to the two widows we meet in today's reading. The first widow, a Gentile by the way, has only enough flour and oil to make one last meal for her son and herself before they run out of food. As a Gentile, she is not obliged to follow the way of the prophets. In fact, in her circle of friends, there is probably a good bit of antipathy toward the Jews and their prophets. Down to her last bit of food and no money, this poor widow could use a Lotto windfall. But, alas, there is nothing like that in her world.

Enter Yahweh, the Creator of the heaven and earth. Unfazed by her religious preference, Yahweh touches her heart. God puts upon her heart the desire to help the prophet. She shares the little bit she has as a way to bless another. God blesses that kind of sharing, indeed. As the scriptures point out, while others in the land still suffer hunger and deprivation, she has food for herself and her son for a year because of her generosity.

In the gospel, we meet the widow at the Temple. While others make a show of giving large amounts of money FROM THEIR SURPLUS, she gives what little she has with deep trust. She trusts that God will bless what she offers and that God will take care of her. We never hear about this widow again from Jesus. But I believe we can rightfully assume Jesus and his Father take care of this widow for the rest of her years because of her generous spirit.

These two widows and how they live their faith challenge me. I dare say, their actions put my own action or lack of it to shame. How often do I hang on to things, material and otherwise, because I think giving them up or giving them away will make me vulnerable and chip away at my perceived security. Even when it comes to my sins, how often do I hold on to them and not let them go. I want to hold on to a lie, gossip, prejudice, or inaction because I think giving them up will make me less than. But that is the point. What I possess often ends up possessing me. Yet as I learn to let go, then God ends up possessing me and offering me eternal life with him.

It's such an easy lesson on the surface. It is so very hard to live.

And how do I begin living this lesson? I do so in simple ways and by taking baby steps. In light of the gospel, one area I should examine is how I tithe to the mission of this parish. Personally, I give over 5% of my income to the Offertory and to our parish outreach. Years ago, when I wasn't anywhere near that percentage, I took the baby step of increasing my giving by .5% - and I continued on that path each year until I reach that 5% mark. Second, I contribute an additional percentage of my income to the bishop's annual appeal. And third, I give another set percentage of my income to various charities whose outreach I admire or who have touched me during my life (like the seminaries that educated me).

When it comes to turning away from sin, I begin by meeting with a confessor once a month and talking about my sins or the temptations I face. At the end of each day, I make an examination of conscience. I

often have to admit that I don't want to give up those sins. I then take the baby step of working on just one of the many sins I confess and consciously seek to stop that particular sin – for a day, then a week, then longer. My conscious effort of trying to avoid that one sin seems easier to handle and change becomes ever more possible.

One final note. While the widow in the gospel is commended by Jesus for her deep faith and trust in the Father, Jesus also excoriates the religious leaders for taking advantage of that widow. He bluntly calls out how they used the widow's sacrificial offering to pay for their own extravagant living. Many of us aren't guilty of such a sin. But in subtler and smaller ways, perhaps we are.

Think of the clothes we buy or the other products we purchase. Are they made by people and in nations where just wages are paid? Is what we purchase and what we use environmentally friendly? After all, God asks us to be stewards of this earth and to leave it in even better shape for our children and their children. If we run a company, a business, a church – do we pay a fair wage? Do we create a life-giving environment for our employees – or use them for maximum profit and for our own benefit? I'm sure you can think of other examples from your own life and experience which challenge how you treat others.

All of us have dreamed about winning the Lotto, and what we would do with the money if we won. It's not wrong to have that dream. So, if you're at the customer service desk at Publix buying Lotto tickets when I walk in the door, you can say "hi". You can rest assured that I won't seek you out at Mass or come to your home and ask for the church's 10% if you win. But use these readings as an opportunity to reflect on the blessings you have received. Use your prayer time – here at Mass and in private – to reflect on what you do with those blessings. Use this moment and the moments ahead of you to wrestle with how you share your time, talent, and treasure with God and the world. And pray for the grace to have the deep and abiding faith of the two women in today's scriptures as you strive to share with others God's abundant blessings first given to you.

Amen? Amen.