

HOMILY

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Saint Martin of Tours Parish, Jackson – November 8, 2015

Today's scripture readings, particularly the Old Testament passage from the Book of Kings and the gospel from Saint Mark, in their stories of two simple, poor widows and their willingness to let go of the little they had in order to respond to the needs of others, prompt all sorts of images for most of us, don't they? For me, the actions of these two widows take me back to stories that have lived in my family for years – stories that pertain to my grandparents on my dad's side of our family. They were both immigrants from Poland, arriving in this country just prior to the turn of the last century. I hope you won't mind if I share some of my recollections from my family's history this morning. In doing so, I suspect that some of your own stories may also come to mind.

What surfaces in my memory today may not be all that different from experiences that some of you have had in your own families. Although my grandfather died many years prior to my birth, I recall my grandmother talking often about life during the Great Depression in the late 1920's and early 1930's. She and my grandfather operated a grocery store – actually something more like a general store – their little community. My grandmother would often reflect upon how difficult life was during that period of time – how people would come into the store with very little or no money at all, hoping to purchase basic supplies to keep their families fed.

I vividly recall my grandmother stating that the rule that was to be followed in the family store – for my dad and my aunts and uncles who worked in the family

business – was one that was simple and direct. If someone was unable to pay for food, you put their name on “the books.” And for most of you my age and older, you understand that “the books” was an old fashioned precursor to today’s credit cards – with a whole lot more risk for the store owner. No one was ever turned away from my grandparents’ store.

You know the next part of the story. As time went on and the Depression waned, some people who had outstanding bills fulfilled their obligations – and some did not. And when my grandmother sold the store after my grandfather died, there were thousands of dollars of unpaid bills.

That being the case, it needs to be said that my grandparents and their children survived pretty well – and in an area where coal mining was the industry for most heads of a household, they survived better than most, despite – yet maybe in some miraculous and mysterious way, even because – of the countless numbers of people who never serviced their debts and still were given food. ... My grandparents weren’t perfect people, but like some many of your parents and grandparents who lived in a different era, they understood very well what we often forget today. They knew that the blessings of this world weren’t theirs to cling to or hoard. They knew that what they were given in life came from the generous hand of God. As such, they also understood that it was their responsibility to care for what they had, to use their gifts well and wisely, and to share them when the opportunity to do so emerged.

Look again at the two widows in today’s scripture passages. Neither of them gave much at all. One gave a cupful of water, a little flour and a bit of oil. The other gave two small copper coins – something by today’s standards would

amount to 1/40th of a penny. Nevertheless, these two women are our teachers today.

Many of us tend to gauge our relationship with God by the things that we do and the things that we give – what we place in a collection basket, how reverently we say our prayers, and the work that we do to support our parish. ... And all of these things are fine indicators of our commitment to live our faith and to serve our brothers and sisters. ... But what happens if we're not able to give as much or to work as hard or to participate as often in the prayers of the Church?

In today's gospel, Jesus helps us put into perspective the relationship with God that we so often seek to measure. The widow in today's gospel is praised by Jesus not because of *what* she gave but because of *who* she was – a woman of *faith* who *relied* upon her God and *trusted* that he would walk with her in her life's journey.

Greatness in the reign of God is not measured by what is in our portfolios, bank accounts or resumes, but by the love in our hearts that directs the use and sharing of those gifts. Greatness in the eyes of God is measured by how authentically we embrace the great commandment to love God in our neighbor, even as we love ourselves.

During his recent visit to the United States, in a homily directed to the clergy, religious and lay faithful of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, Pope Francis reflected upon an American saint whose life was so intimately woven into this corner of God's kingdom – Saint Katharine Drexel – the patroness of your neighboring parish in Pleasant Mount.

When she spoke to Pope Leo XIII of the needs of the missions, the Pope asked her pointedly: “What about you? What are you going to do?” ... “Those words,” Pope Francis asserted, “changed Katharine’s life, because they reminded her that, in the end, every Christian man and woman, by virtue of baptism, has received a mission.”

And each one of us has to respond to that mission. Each one of us, as best and as authentically as we can, has to respond to the Lord’s call to build up his Body, the Church – not by giving lip service to the teachings of the gospel like the scribes – not by merely giving from our surplus resources of time and treasure – but in honesty and humility, recognizing our brokenness and our great need for God – by giving to God all that we are able to share in deep gratitude for all that God has given to us.

And you – the wonderful people who are Saint Martin of Tours Parish – have responded to the Lord’s call well – for 75 years. For 75 years, you’ve prayed and celebrated the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist. You’ve learned about your faith and you’ve taught others of the power found within the simple message of the gospel. You’ve built a community and served the neediest in your midst. You’ve laughed and cried, you’ve struggled and worked very hard to keep the faith. ... You have opened your hearts to God and God, in turn, has continued to build his Church through your generous hands and hearts.

Saint John Paul II, early in his pontificate, spoke of the need for the parish to once again adhere to its fundamental vocation and mission. Listen to his words. The parish should be “a place in the world for the community of believers to gather together as a sign and instrument of the vocation of all to communion; in a word, to be a house of welcome to all and a place of service to all or, as Pope John XXIII

was fond of saying, to be the ‘village fountain’ to which all would have recourse in their thirst.”

My friends, we gather in prayer to celebrate the Eucharist, the power and presence of God that is the heart of our faith. We also gather to remember a parish ... a people who have lived the faith of Jesus Christ for well over 75 years. May our prayer today around this table of the Lord be one of gratitude and hope: gratitude for all that has been and hope for what will be through the grace and goodness of God.