

On Giving

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 what it's like to be at the mercy of forces outside their control --that there, but for the grace of God, go I. And they know how even 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.

It's often thought that giving is altruistic. But I think that is not a good way of looking at it. For 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, a sacrifice, 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 while, individually unique, is not a separate atom but more like a quilt, an interwoven fabric of multicolored patches with whom and through whom we belong and play our part. Our giving is more like quilting, repairing tears, sewing on new patches as occasions present themselves. Today's widows were not altruists. The first widow gave to the prophet who asked to live with her and her son, in his time of need. She too was in her time of need, alone with her son. At first she felt she had nothing to give, but she learned that in giving what she could she received back even more—his attentiveness to her. And so the two survived, they never ran out of food, they never fell into despair, by taking care of each other. Our second widow was similar. She gave what little she could to the temple, the home of whom she held sacred, to whom she belonged, giving her life meaning and purpose.

Giving isn't selfless. It's good for us. It grows our soul. It extends ourselves beyond ourselves, stitch by stitch, patch by patch. We become generous and compassionate people, not just in the moment, as a one-off, but as part of who 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 we needed valued at two million dollars. But I tell them we pulled it off not because we were a bunch of

selfless altruists. We did it because that was who we were, as a community. We needed our own building, so we did whatever ended up being necessary to build it. People approached it not like they were writing a check to some charity but like they were building an extension onto their own home. For that was what we were building, our home. People showed up to help out whenever they could—on weekends, on evenings, and they helped out however they could, sanding and staining the wood, polishing the cement floor, contributing appliances, bringing refreshments. And we all had a good time together as we did it. Because we were building our home, a home for worshipping together, for caring and supporting each other. A home for celebrating the milestones of our lives, both welcoming new life and commemorating our dearly departed, celebrating new marriages and teaming up to start new projects. For 80 families to build a two million dollar church we were not lucky, we were 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 life. For creation is itself God's greatest gift to each of us, the gift of ourselves to ourselves, And we a gift not meant for ourselves alone. We are a gift 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 were important at the time, but its not what we miss now. 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 in Suncrest, in our time, right now.