

These are challenging readings today. We hear the story of two widows each living in abject poverty. The first with just enough flour and oil to make a last meal for her and her son, the other with only a few cents left to her name. Yet each woman willingly shares what little they have.

When I see these readings I wonder about my own willingness to give. Could I ever be like these widows? Could I ever give the last that I have for myself or my family to someone else? I'm not so sure I could. It is certainly easier to be charitable when we have enough for ourselves. It's very easy to give from our excess rather than from our poverty. But the challenge of these readings seems to be inviting us to be willing to go beyond our excess and give from our need. Or is it?

In the Gospel, Jesus never condemns the rich who give from their excess. He notes it, but doesn't really condemn them. What he does object to are the scribes who make a great showing of their holiness but at heart are really self seeking. I think the point is more the motive behind the charity than the amount that is given. The two widows give all that they have left not to bring notoriety to themselves, but rather because they trust in God's mercy and love to sustain them.

The first reading in particular seems to make this point. The widow from Zarephath is not a Jew. She does not believe in the same God as Elijah. This is evident in her statement "As the LORD, your God, lives . . ." She acknowledges Elijah's God – our God – and in so doing puts her trust in him. She then makes a cake from the meager flour and oil she has left and gives it to Elijah, fully prepared to trust in the prophet's promise that "The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry..." And her trust is rewarded; they eat of that handful of flour and few drops of oil for a full year.

The widow in the gospel has two coins. She could well have put one in the treasury and kept the other for herself. But she donated both, placing all her trust in God's mercy.

Perhaps this is the deeper message today; not so much to give all that we have, but rather to realize our dependence on God and to trust in him completely. This doesn't mean that we should go out and give all our belongings away, as noble as that might be. If we did that then we'd all become burdens on society. Our parish outreach would be overwhelmed and poor Sr. Alice would be even busier than she already is. Rather, the challenge of today's readings is to realize that all we have comes from God; we are just stewards of the wonderful resources he gives us. And as stewards we have a responsibility to use those resources for the good of all.

Mother Teresa told a story about how one day she was walking down the street when a beggar came up to her and said, 'Mother Teresa, everybody is giving to you, I also want to give to you. Today, for the whole day, I got only thirty cents. I want to give it to you.' Mother Teresa thought for a moment: 'If I take the thirty cents he will have nothing to eat tonight, and if I don't take it I will hurt his feelings.' So she put out her hands and took the money. She said "I have never seen such joy on anybody's face as I saw on the face of that beggar man at the thought that he too could give to Mother Teresa." Mother Teresa went on: "It was a big sacrifice for the poor man, who had sat in the sun all day long and received only thirty cents. It was beautiful. Thirty cents is such a small amount, and I can get nothing with it, but as he gave it up and I took, it became like thousands because it was given with so much love. God looks, not at the greatness of the work, but at the love with which it is performed."

This was one of Mother Teresa's greatest messages; do small things with great love. But this also applies to doing great things with great love. The widows in today's readings did small things with great love for God. Jesus gave all that he had; his very life out of his great love for us. In our own way, we are called to do everything we do out of our love for God and for each other, trusting that God will always provide for what we need.