

My friends, peace be with you. In today's scripture readings we hear a lot about widows. And because the life of a widowed woman in Jesus' day differed a lot from the life of widows today, I'd like to take a moment to talk about what it meant to be a widow in biblical times.

In Biblical times, there was no system of social services like we have in 21st century America. Nor were women accepted in the workplace. This meant that a widow was in a precarious situation. She would have no source of income or security, unless she had adult male children who could take care of her. And unlike our system today, flawed though it may be, the widows did not have life insurance, social security, or even a soup kitchen they could visit. If they had no family to care for them, they were forced to become beggars. So they truly were among the poorest and insignificant people in the society.

With that in mind let's take a look at these readings about the widows. In the first reading we hear about the widow of Zerephath. She is living in a time when there is a famine in the land, and she and her son are literally down to their last meal. She has nothing - no money, no food, and no hope. This is when the Prophet Elijah comes to her. Now, here we have an important biblical principle being displayed. Namely, that God comes into our lives at *this* moment - at the time when we are most vulnerable and helpless. This, of course, is not due to a limitation on God's part. No, it is due to our own human nature. You see, when things are going well, we can easily tend to forget our need for God, we can forget that we are totally dependent on God, and we neglect to reach out to God, to invite God into our lives to be our caretaker. But, when we find ourselves in situations where we've hit rock bottom, so to speak, that's the moment when we realize that we aren't self sufficient. That's the moment when we are ready to welcome God into our lives. And this is where the widow of Zerephath happens to be.

So what does the prophet say to this woman who has nothing and has hit rock bottom? Please bring me some water and a cake. Folks, this is Biblical humor, right? Here we have a woman who is herself a beggar, and the prophet is asking this beggar to give *him* food and drink. Well, naturally the woman rejects this request, saying that she only has enough for her and her son to have one last meal, and then they will die. Now pay attention here, because we are about to learn one of the most fundamental truths of the spiritual life. And that is: to receive God's abundance, we must willingly give. It is a paradox, I know, but it's true.

So as Elijah encounters this woman in her desperate situation, what does he do, he asks her to give. To give? "No, no," you say. This woman doesn't need to give something, she needs to receive something. See, there's the paradox. It is precisely now, in this desperate situation when we are asked to give.

Well, here is the spiritual truth that we learn - when you are connected to God, who is perfect in giving, then you can continuously give and give and give and never run out. When you are connected to God, who is gift, then you can give and give out of that deep space, and you will never run out, "The jar of flour shall not go empty nor the jug of oil run dry."

The flip side of this truth is that when we cling to substitutes for God - such as money, power, beauty and honor - then what happens is that we hoard, and hoard and hoard all we want, but we will never be satisfied.

You see, when we are connected to God, who is infinite giving, we can give infinitely. When we are connected to God who is infinite love, we can love infinitely. Think about that. Do you want to receive more? The secret is not to hoard, but to give. Do you want more love in your life, then be a person who loves others. Do you want more joy in your life, well then be a person who brings joy to others.

This is the transforming power of the scriptures. And it is the same thing that is going on in today's Gospel. Jesus praises the widow for giving a few cents. Why, well because she gave out of her connectedness to God. She was not like the scribes who used their religion as a way to increase their own honor. She did not seek to hoard, or draw attention to herself, but to give.

If we allow this biblical principle to operate in our own lives, it can change us. I'd like to share with you an example from my own life.

After college I moved to Chicago and worked for a fortune 500 company as a computer consultant. I was making a very good salary, in fact I got 3 raises over the course of my 1 year with the company. I had a nice apartment in suburban Chicago, a nice car and I was doing pretty well for myself.

The only problem, was that I was miserable. The job, the money, the car, the apartment couldn't satisfy me. I would often call home to my mom, and complain for hours about how unhappy I was, to the extent that my mom became concerned for my well-being. As I prayed over this situation, I realized that God was calling me to give and not hoard. So after a lot of prayer and consultation, I made the decision to move to New York City and volunteer at a soup kitchen in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn. For those of you unfamiliar with this area, it is one of the poorest neighborhoods in Brooklyn. And it's run by a street gang known as the Bloods.

Now this change wasn't easy, mind you. I recall getting on the plane to move from Chicago to New York, and the reality hit me, "Oh my goodness, what I have I done?" I even began to make backup plans in my mind to move back to Chicago.

Friends, I am here today to tell you that living and working in New York was one of the best experiences of my life. I lived in what used to be the convent of a church, and was given a monthly stipend of \$300 to cover my food and other expenses, which in New York does not go very far. And I gave of myself. Day in and day out. I gave. It was difficult work. And contrary to what I initially thought, after three months of being at the soup kitchen I realized that I was not going to change the world. I wasn't even going to make a dent in poverty and hunger in New York, let alone the world. But I still kept on giving.

Eventually, as I did this, I realized that the more I gave, the more I received. I grew closer to God and was a lot happier. There was no comparison between my life in Chicago and my life in New York. Despite the poverty, my life in New York was so much better. Why? Because, like the widows, I decided not to hoard, but to give.

(pause)

Friends, the truth contained in these scriptures are not mere words. The truth has the power to impact and change your life. I encourage you to learn this first hand. Follow the example of the widows. Let go of whatever self-interest you are hoarding, and instead cling to God, and give of yourself. The Gospel will change your life, I promise.