

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 B

Two widows take center stage in the Scriptures today, two women who lived some 850 years apart, but united in the timeless human experience of loss, grief, and poverty. So many more stories could be told, where these same sufferings still visit families today. Yet they have something more in common than their sorrows, something far more profound. They are also united by their persevering trust, a profound faith that *made them willing, even in the face of great personal need, to give with remarkable generosity* – to give *from their poverty*, as Jesus says, even though it was all they had to live on. Perhaps the death of their husbands and their resulting want and isolation had taught them patience, strength, and courage -- how to let go even of what is precious and depend on God alone. Their experience of loss had not embittered them; instead, their sufferings had matured into freedom and trust. *Mercy received grows into mercy given away again.*

I sometimes wonder what happened to the Gospel's widow – though commended by Jesus for giving everything she had, what was the rest of that story? Did someone come to her relief ... perhaps one of the Twelve or Jesus Himself? *We don't know; but even asking that question means the Gospel is at work in us – what we do for the least, we do for the Lord.* We DO know a bit more about the widow of Zarephath. Though she housed the prophet, and though she continued to provide for him from that miraculous jar of flour and jug of oil, just a few verses later she is visited by even more sorrow: her son, her only remaining family, becomes sick, then sicker ... and then dies. Even the presence of God's prophet did not keep suffering from her house. The Twelve learned the same lesson during the storm on the Sea of Galilee ... Jesus was with them in the boat, but the storm still threatened them. Having faith, being close to God, praying sincerely ... these do not prevent suffering from entering our lives.

The Lord's Prayer is one of the first prayers we learn as children. At the end of it, Jesus teaches us to pray: "deliver us from evil." Of course we would prefer not to suffer. But that's not quite all the words

mean. We ask to be delivered from evil ... from sin, from despair, from whatever would separate us from God. For many of us, poverty is not so much material need as the poverty of our self-interest, our busy schedules and distracted lives, our self-reliance that can make us indifferent to others. Sometimes, our poverty too arises from suffering, where we feel overwhelmed and sort of paralyzed. What faith gives us, then, is not protection from all adversity, but strength to *endure and overcome* the adversity an imperfect world inflicts, trusting even when we cannot understand. And more – faith also means that I recognize I am not merely called to receive God's care, but also to share that care for others ... to do to the least as I would do to Jesus Himself, for *mercy received grows into mercy given away again*.

Perhaps we might feel that what we have to offer is insignificant, too little against the overwhelming needs of a troubled world. But we find hope in that jar of flour and jug of oil, and those two small coins ... for God's compassion will never run out, His mercies do not fail. Where the widow of Zarephath says, "When we have eaten this bread, we shall die," we are able to say just the opposite in the gift of the Eucharist, the fruit of Christ's own self-emptying on the Cross, giving not His last two coins but His very life: "When we have eaten this bread, we shall live forever." This week, take the opportunity to give from your own poverty, whatever that might be for you, and know that even the smallest gestures offered in love are blessed by the Lord.