

Faith, Hope, and Love

In the name of him who, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly awaiting for him, dear friends in Christ: You probably noticed the similarities in today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. In both there is a woman who either gives or shares what little she has to live on for the support of the Church. In the reading from Mark, it's a poor widow who donates her small daily living allowance to the temple treasury; and in the reading from 1st Kings, it's a destitute Sidonian woman who is willing to share her last bit of food with God's appointed prophet, Elijah.

These two texts, together or independently, are usually the launch point for a scathing sermon on stewardship – everybody's least favorite topic. I know, because whenever the district sends down yet another of its foolproof stewardship programs designed to pressure the members of our churches into giving more of their hard earned dollars to support its projects, these texts will figure prominently in the package. It's guaranteed. I know too because even though I've never used any of those stewardship programs they're constantly trying to foist upon us, I have preached on the topic of stewardship from these texts. After all, you can't deny that they are, on the surface at least, about giving to support the ministry of the Church. And if you're going to be faithful to the Word, it's going to come up.

But this morning I'd like for us to look past that surface level. I want to look at the story behind the stories; and rather than merely hold up these two women as examples of generous giving that we should strive to imitate (because "Oh, then won't we be holy and wonderful too!"—*not!*) instead let's ask what is it that these two ladies have that makes them the way they are. What's in them that driving their attitudes and actions? What's enabling them to be so sacrificial in their giving? Because whatever it is, *that's* what we should be striving for. You see, we know what they didn't have much of: money. They were both extremely poor. But they were very rich in other ways; I dare say far richer than any of us. So rather than focus on their giving and their poverty, let's focus on their wealth that we too might attain it; and let's ask the question, "What have they got that I haven't got?"

When the cowardly lion of the *Wizard of Oz* asked that question, his new-found friends immediately answered "Courage". And we might be tempted to answer the same with regards to these two selfless women: they were courageous. They showed by their actions that they had no thought or care of what the future might hold for them, and so they boldly gave away what little they had to survive on.

Well, okay ... that's a start; but courage must be based on something. If not, it's only recklessness or foolhardiness. A lion can be courageous because it's strong and has sharp fangs and claws; it's a killing machine. It has no reason to fear the other creatures of the forest. If a mouse roared at you menacingly, you wouldn't think it was brave; you'd think it was stupid. And then you'd step on it. So if the two women in today's readings showed courage, then there was something of substance behind their courage. We know it wasn't strength. Or monetary wealth. Or even intelligence. In fact, it could be argued that their actions showed a decided lack of reasoning. I mean, if you have next to nothing, does it make any sense to give it away?

What then? Well, if you noticed the sermon title, you already know. It's not one thing, but three: namely faith, hope, and love – which according to St. Paul are the three great virtues

in which all Christians should be striving to abound. *They* are what these two women were rich in. Let's look at them one at a time.

First faith: here in the church we talk about faith all the time; but what is it? It can be a little confusing because we use the word two different ways. On one hand, we speak of the Christian faith; that is, the *content* of what we believe. It's the sum of the church's teachings and doctrines. It's what we express when we recite the creeds. So that's one way we use the word *faith*. On the other hand, we can speak of a person's individual faith not referring to *what* they believe, but rather to the degree or extent to which they trust whatever it is they believe. How tightly are they clinging to their beliefs? In this sense we'll say that someone's faith is weak or strong.

It's this second sense that we're interested in this morning: the faith that grasps and holds onto what's believed. And there are two things to point out about it. One, that it needs an object – something to hold onto. I hear Christian teachers telling their people that they just have to have faith; but they don't tell them what it is their supposed to have faith in. It's like standing on the dock telling someone who's drowning in the lake that they just have to believe they'll be saved. That's worthless. You have to throw them the life ring so they have something to hang onto. That's how they're saved. It's the same with faith: you've got to have something to hold onto. The quality of faith, though, how firm the grip is will be based on knowledge and experience. It's built up over time. In the case I just mentioned, when the drowning person first grabs the life ring and puts some weight on it, it sinks down, often fooling the person into thinking it's not helping any, so they let it go. In their panic they don't realize that when it went down, their head went up. I've actually seen this happen. But if they were to hold onto it, they'd realize that it was helping; and over time they'd calm down and see that they were in no danger as long as they hold on.

Likewise, if a perfect stranger approached you and proposed some kind of business deal that could potentially place you at risk, you'd say "No way. I don't know you. How do I know I can trust you?" But if someone you know well, whom you know to be smart, honest, successful in business, and careful with investments proposed the same deal to you, you'd be much more inclined to buy in. Why? Because you have faith in the person. You know you can trust them.

This is the kind of faith displayed by widow who contributed her two coins. Her faith is in the Lord. She knows from a lifetime of experience and seeing his promises fulfilled that he is reliable and trustworthy. She has confidence in him because she's enjoyed his care and protection every day of her life. She also knows the history of God's dealings with his people, and knows that he has never failed or forsaken them – even in the darkest times. And so she makes her offering with full assurance that whether she has much, little, or nothing at all, the Lord will continue to keep and care for her. This is faith: the kind of faith the Lord wants us to be rich in.

And that brings us to the second virtue, which is hope. The Scriptures tells us that hope is the certainty and substance of things not yet seen. Where faith is built on experience, personal knowledge, and promises fulfilled, hope is absolute confidence in promises made that have not yet been fulfilled. It's the assurance of things not yet realized.

It's hope that we see most clearly displayed by the widow of Zarephath, who, it should be stressed, was not one of the Lord's chosen people Israel. Sidon was one of the neighboring pagan nations that was also suffering from the severe famine that the Lord brought on his people in an effort to turn them back to himself. We aren't told how this woman came to know

the Lord; but it's evident from her first words to Elijah, "As the Lord your God lives ..." that she did believe in him. So, she's something of an anomaly. In a time when very few Israelites trusted the Lord, this woman with a pagan background did. And that's no doubt why the Lord sent Elijah to her, rather than to one of his own people.

In any case, her hope is seen in her reaction to the promise of the Lord that Elijah gives her. "If when making a meal of your last little bit of flour and oil, you prepare first a portion for me, then thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty until [the famine is over]'. You have to admit that doesn't make sense. No one had ever seen or heard of such a thing. If there's one cup of flour in the container and you take out a cup, then there's not going to be anything left. It'll be empty. That's the way things work. It's basic math. So there could be no personal experience for this woman to base her belief that it wouldn't be empty – and that's what makes her belief hope rather than faith. But hope she had, not just in the sense of "oh, wouldn't it be nice if ..." No, she really believed that it would be exactly as the prophet had said. That's why she prepared a meal for Elijah first. And we heard how her hope was rewarded. There was always enough for the woman, her son, and the prophet.

Now, we haven't been given the promise of a never empty flour jar or oil jug. Personally, these days I'd rather have a gas tank that worked that way; but that hasn't been promised either. But as Christians we do have hope in promises that are yet to be fulfilled, the most obvious being the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. None of us has ever seen the graves of our loved ones being opened and their perfectly restored bodies rising up to new and eternal life. But we know that one day it will happen. Our hope is sure. Why? Because we know that Christ died for our sins and rose again from the grave. And his promise to us is that on the Last Day he will raise up all the dead, and those whose hope was in him will inherit eternal life in glory, and those who did not have this hope will be condemned.

But the thing to see is that this hope influences our thoughts and actions now, in the present. Just as the widow of Zarephath showed her hope by sharing her food with the prophet, so also our hope of the resurrection and the life to come ought to be evident in the way we live now. It means, for example, that we don't treat death as the worst thing that can happen to someone. Far worse than death is living without faith in Christ. It means also that we'll treat this life for what it is: merely the vestibule for the life to come. What we have here is temporary, fleeting; it's passing away. Real living begins once we pass through the door into the living room. So it's imperative that we go through the right door: Jesus, who is the way, truth, and life. We don't want to get so wrapped up in acquiring and admiring what's here in the vestibule that we get confused and end up choosing the door to the basement instead. Let the hearer understand. We want to make sure that our faith is in Christ so that our hope is in what lies beyond – the things he has prepared for us.

And with that kind of faith for now and hope for the future, we'll be free to practice the third great Christian virtue, which is love. And again I want to emphasize that when we speak of love in a Christian context, we don't mean feelings of warmth and affection. Those are nice; but they aren't love. Love is a commitment. It's a promise. It's a conscious decision to place the needs of others ahead of my own. It's to care for others first and to live sacrificially for them.

This is what we see in the widow who placed her two coins – her daily living allowance – in the collection box. By so doing she was saying to herself, "Today I'll go without food so that this money of mine can further the work of the Lord and serve his kingdom." And it's worth noting that she didn't worry about how it would serve the Lord. She didn't earmark it for her

favorite mission project. She simply gave in sacrificial love, trusting that the Lord would use it according to his will. The widow of Zarephath also showed love to her son, and especially to Elijah. You know that there had to be a part of her telling her not to trust Elijah. She had a sinful, doubting nature like everyone else. And that means there was a voice in her head telling her that this Elijah was a con-man, trying to cheat a poor widow out of her last meal. This voice inside her, as we know, lost to voice of her hope in the promise of God spoken by the prophet; but I'm convinced that part of hope's victory was her love. She knew all about hunger. We can only imagine how long she'd already been living on a starvation diet, trying to make her food supply last as long as possible. Let me suggest then when Elijah came to her, she didn't see only a prophet of God making bold promises. She saw also a fellow human being in need. And in love she was willing to give up some of what little she had so that another person – a stranger to her, really – would not go hungry.

So, faith, hope, and love: the three great Christian virtues – and of which St. Paul tells us that the greatest is love. But you can't have it without the other two. They always go together. In today's readings we've considered two women who were rich in these virtues. The question that remains to be asked is: how can we also become rich in them?

In answer, we begin by recognizing that we aren't rich in them at present. That is to say, unless you can readily envision yourself giving your last dime for the work of the church or sharing your last bit of food with a total stranger from a foreign country who's making wild promises about a never-empty Tupperware container in your pantry, then you've got a way to go. Next, seeing the poverty of our souls with respect to these heavenly treasures, we've got to accept that we cannot produce them in ourselves anymore than we can change lead to gold. All good gifts come from above – from the Lord who desires nothing more than to enrich us with these treasures, and who has promised to give them to those who seek them from him.

And then we follow his simple enrichment plan. Faith, we are told, comes from hearing the Word of God – which as we know, isn't an *it*; he's a *who*. Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh. Or say it another way, the way you learn to trust the Lord is to know him. You spend time with Jesus reading, studying, hearing him proclaimed in the church's Word and Sacrament. You learn how he's kept his promises in the past, and you experience him fulfilling them for you in the present: when you hear his word of forgiveness, when he gives you his body and blood, and as you live day to day in his peace.

From faith springs hope. Once you see how reliable the Lord Jesus has been in the past and is now for the present, you are able to trust him that much more for the future – even to keep promises that are hard to imagine. Like the resurrection. Like eternal life in heaven. And then, building on both faith in him and hope in his promises, and being transformed from within by the Spirit of Christ who in sacrificial love gave himself for our sins, we too can begin to show sacrificial love to one another – and yes, to strangers who in need of the basic necessities of life; and even more importantly, in need of the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ by which eternal life is obtained.

My friends, the richer we are in these virtues, the more we can share. So may we with all diligence pursue these heavenly treasures. And may the Lord cause us to super abound in faith, hope, and love through Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!