

Lewis Hyde, in his book, *The Gift*, tells of two married sisters who lived near each other in one of the poorest black neighborhoods on the south side of Chicago. They unaccountably came into a windfall—sudden wealth. Maybe an unknown rich relative died. Maybe it was the lottery. In any case, two families had more money than they had ever known in their lifetime.

Faced with this prospect, the two sisters responded in different ways. One stayed in the neighborhood, and one moved her family out of the neighborhood. The one who stayed among her people had a constant procession to her door. This one needed medical help; another had a rent problem. And so it went. It was not long before her sudden fortune was gone. The other one who moved out of the neighborhood held on to her money. But her family ties and friendships were stretched thin, and many eventually ended.

It’s an interesting dilemma. Which set of riches to prefer—material wealth or a rich network of relationships. In either case, the sisters would survive, but in quite different ways. While the sister who held on to her money had the wherewithal to keep her family in some style, the other sister and her family lived in the cycle of generosity. For her generosity in the present would be met in the future by the generosity of others, in their turn. No one would be wealthy, but no one would starve either.

When Elijah called on the widow in the city of Zarephath for help and a meal, she responded with a generosity that risks all. The widow had nothing, in fact she is down to the last morsel of food for herself and her son, both at the point of death. Yet out of her nothingness, in faith, she shared what she had with Elijah. Elijah responds to her generosity with the gift that kept on giving. He promises her that God will supply both oil and barley meal to tide her and her son through the period of famine. Her faith and generosity are rewarded. “The jar of flour did not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry” (I Kgs. 17:16).

Jesus in the Gospel has some hard words for the scribes. The charge is that they are neglecting the basic prescriptions of the covenant which stipulated that the way Israel would know it was living the generous love of God toward them would be through a like love of neighbor, especially the poorest and neediest among them symbolized by widows, orphans and immigrants. Jesus accuses the scribes of devouring the houses of widows at the same time they make a great show of religion as they recite lengthy prayers. A disconnect between word and deed as we reflected upon last weekend. In the midst of this recital, an elderly widow appears on the scene. Without knowing that she is about to become an object lesson, she reaches into her purse and places her last coin in the temple treasury. Risking all, she gives of her need—without calculation and without consideration of remuneration. Perhaps others have helped her in her poverty, out of their need. We are not told. Nevertheless, in faith she offers a generous gift, trusting that God who provides for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field will provide for her.

Both widows exemplify the generosity of God. The letter to the Hebrews proclaims the generosity of God who withheld nothing in giving us himself in Jesus. Jesus in turn, who “though rich, emptied himself became poor” (Phil.2:1-11). In every Mass this self-emptying sacrifice of Jesus is made present sacramentally in every Mass as he proclaims “This is my Body, this is my Blood given for you”. Jesus and the two widows challenge us to a like faith-filled generosity not only regarding our attitude toward material wealth, but also in offering the gift of ourselves especially when our “jar of oil” and our “barrel of flour” have gone dry in the face of the many demands of our life--offering a word of kindness or encouragement personally to someone or writing them a short note or sending them a text; giving someone preference in traffic; playing a board game with the children even after a long day at work; listening to a lonely teen or elderly parent who needs a compassionate ear; while not “big” acts in the scheme of life, are practical ways we develop an attitude and practice of selfless love for others in the model of Jesus and the widows. As the famous prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi proclaims: “It is in giving that we receive, and in dying to ourselves that we are born to eternal life.”