

I want to tell you a bit about a great family that I am privileged to call friends. I won't use their last name because I want to respect their privacy. The parents of this family, Mary Beth and Ryan are focused on living as intentional disciples of Jesus. For them, this means giving all they can to serve Jesus and His kingdom. Mary Beth homeschools her children and pours out tons of time and energy into educating her kids. Her and Ryan both spend time praying with their kids and helping them grow in their relationship with Jesus. They are active members of their parish and have served in many different ways to help other people grow in their faith. Both them and their children have a focus on Jesus and His mission and it shows in the way they love each other and the joy that they exude as a family.

Ryan and Mary Beth have eight children and their children show the same generosity as their parents in their willingness to serve others and use their gifts and talents for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Their oldest son, Sam, is currently serving as a missionary at Damascus Catholic mission campus to help bring people to encounter Jesus more fully in their lives. Ryan and Mary Beth's total commitment as Catholic disciples of Jesus is a beautiful heritage that they have passed onto their kids.

Another example of their commitment to giving all for Jesus is that Mary Beth and Ryan chose to adopt two children who are in power wheelchairs because of significant physical challenges. These two kids, Gabe and Elizabeth, are some of the best young people I know. They radiate the joy of Christ and give generously to others. Their lives are a powerful witness to the joy of Christ which cannot be tamed by any difficulty this world gives.

I'm thinking of this great family today because of a moment that I was blessed to witness years ago. They were working to make their two-story house with a basement wheelchair accessible. This meant installing an elevator in the house. The pastor of their parish became aware of this need and was able to secure the funding to pay for this elevator. I was there when he made the call to let them know that the elevator was paid for. It was such a beautiful moment of joy.

This family and that beautiful moment of them receiving a huge surprise in the form of an elevator is a great living testimony to the truth that God is never outdone in generosity. The life of discipleship calls us to a total commitment of ourselves. When we allow God to help us answer this call, he gives us Himself and many other graces that we could never even imagine. That elevator is just a grain of sand at the bottom of an ocean of blessings I am sure their family has received over the years. And many of those blessings are things hidden from our eyes: healings of the heart, trust in difficult times, mercy for each other when they need it, joy to balance their sorrow and more. I cannot say it enough: God cannot be outdone in generosity.

Both the first reading and the Gospel show us the way that God has stacked the deck many times over in our favor when he invites us to entrust Him with everything. In the first reading we see the encounter between the prophet Elijah and a poor widow in Zarephath. Elijah asks the widow to help take care of him, but there is one problem: the widow is at the end of her rope. She is clearly concerned that she is not going to have enough even to survive. When Elijah asks her to make him a cake, she tells him that she has just enough to make one last meal for her and her son. Her hope for the future is clearly pretty dim, but she still has faith. And by this faith she puts her trust in the prophet Elijah, who tells her: "For the LORD, the God of Israel, says, 'The jar of flour shall not go empty, nor the jug of oil run dry, until the day when the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'"

The widow at Zarephath puts everything on the line: she has reached the very limit of her worldly means, but at the prompting of the prophet, she entrusts her livelihood to the Lord and is not disappointed. God provides not just for her and her son, but also allows them to have enough left over to serve the prophet Elijah by keeping him fed. I am sure that this miraculous, superabundant provision from the Lord of her earthly needs was coupled with a superabundant filling of her spiritual needs as well. During that year when the jar of flour didn't go empty and the jug of oil didn't run dry, the Lord was filling her and her son's spirits with all they needed, as well.

A similar dynamic is at play with the widow that Jesus points out in the Gospel today. This poor widow comes to the treasury of the temple and gives a tiny amount: two small coins worth a few cents. But it is not the amount that she gives, but the fact that, as Jesus points out: “she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.” The widow has given all to God even though she has very little. Her gift indicates a posture of trust that God will provide for her.

Jesus points out that the others are contributing from their surplus wealth. In a sense, their gift is almost an afterthought. They have their riches to spend how they want and then, from the surplus leftover, they give to God.

The difference is the hearts of these givers. Right before comparing the widows to the other givers, Jesus rebukes the scribes, who make an outward show of faith while being inwardly far from God. They love being recognized by others for what they do and this recognition seems to be the driver behind their actions. The same seems to be true for those giving from their surplus. They are giving from a sense of exterior responsibility based on what others think, rather than from an inward place of generosity based on responding to God.

So back to the family I started with. Ryan and MaryBeth, from what I have seen, know deeply the generosity of God. They have come to appreciate that depth of Jesus’ love for them. In face of God’s great generosity to them, they have given of themselves generously from their time, talent and treasure.

Remember what Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 6? “So do not worry and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’ All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.” By seeking God’s kingdom first, everything else has been given to them, including an elevator!

For me, this is a beautiful example of covenant love. A covenant is where two people give themselves to each other such that they belong to each other. Covenants establish family bonds. God invites us to covenant love with Him. We are brought into covenant love through our baptism, but often we fall into the temptation to give not from a place of total belonging, of covenant, but from a place of detached generosity, where, from a distance, we give to God what we can.

But when we truly live from that reality of total belonging to God, things are different. We don't fall into the trap of just giving God the surplus. From a place of covenant love, everything is shared. We give God everything, putting our lives and possessions in His hands. Through prayer, we discern how God is inviting us to give ourselves and our time, talent and treasure out of love for Him.

So the call for us is to have the courage to put ourselves in God's hands in covenant love, like the widow in Zarephath and the poor widow at the temple treasury. Let's entrust ourselves fully to the Lord, who has given everything to us and invites us to entrust everything to Him.

*+ Heavenly Father, we thank you for the new and everlasting covenant established by the blood of your Son. Jesus, thank you for bringing us into the covenant family of God through our baptism. Thank you for giving all of Yourself to us, help us with your grace to give all of ourselves to you. Come Holy Spirit, open our hearts to generous giving to God, so that we can give our whole livelihood for the sake of the Kingdom! We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen. +*