

Last week, we heard Jesus give the two great commandments: Love the Lord your God with all you heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. This week, the Holy Scriptures show us how to live out that first great commandment.

First, Jesus shows us that, if we wish to love God with all our heart, it's not enough to be like the scribes. The scribes were the teachers of the law and the prophets. They knew the scriptures better than just about anyone else. And they were honored for this. But their knowledge about God was not enough. If all of the learning and study of the scribes did not translate to great love of God and great love of neighbor, then the only thing they would receive from God would be a very severe condemnation.

But Jesus doesn't leave his disciples with only what NOT to do. He then points to the poor widow. Jesus had watched as she put her two small coins into the temple treasury. Many good Jews were there at the temple that day. And all of them put in more money than that widow. But they all gave from what they had left over. The poor widow, on the other hand, gave her last two coins. She gave everything. Now Jesus doesn't say that the rich people who gave only the surplus of their money don't love God. But in this action of the poor widow, her love for God and her faith in God are undeniable. She gave all that she had because she trusted, she knew that God would provide for her. And that trust, that faith, led her to great love and great generosity.

We see this same faithful generosity in the poor widow in the days of Elijah. At first glance it seems almost cruel that Elijah would ask this poor widow to provide food and water for him. She only had enough grain for one last meal before she and her son would die. But what Elijah was really doing was calling out the faith in that poor widow. He was asking her to trust in God because Elijah knew that God would provide for her and her son. The poor widow had faith in God's word through the prophet and so out of love for God she provided for Elijah; and God, in turn, provided for her.

These stories of great faith and generosity are beautiful illustrations of the Old Testament principle of tithing. In the Old Covenant, the people were expected to give one tenth (10%) of all of their produce to God. This was to support the temple as well as the priests and Levites who ministered in the temple. And from this donation, the poor would also be cared for. But the tenth of the produce given to God was not to be just what was left over, not just what the people didn't need. The people were expected to give the FIRST tenth of their harvest. In other words, if a person grew wheat or barley, they would calculate their total expected yield and then give the first ten percent of that as soon as they harvested it.

This takes great faith, because one can never be certain that the other 90% of the crop is going to be successfully harvested. What if a great storm came through or a flood or a fire? The poor farmer could be left with nothing. This seems impractical - like the poor widow giving her last two coins to the temple or the last of her food to the prophet. But that was exactly the point.

God was teaching His people that our faith in God, which is expressed in our love for God, should be impractical. If we find ourselves calculating out how much we can afford to give to God, we have missed the point. And this applies not only to money. This applies to every part of our life. Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart, with ALL your soul, with ALL your mind, with ALL your strength.

This is why these two widows of scripture are such powerful examples for us. And when their example seems unrealistic or impractical or irresponsible, then we can know that our own love for God is not yet where it needs to be. But when we strive to give everything to God, when we act in a way that is more generous than what seems practical, our generosity will grow. The more we give to God, the more we will want to give to Him. The more we love God, the more we will want to love Him. And this generosity and love will, without a doubt, spill over into love for our neighbor.

And this kind of love for God this kind of generous offering to God is exactly what Jesus himself did for us. The second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews reminds of what Jesus offered to God for us. Jesus Christ offered Himself on the Cross - His own Body and Blood - to free us from our sins. He offered Himself totally and completely to win for us the grace that would allow us to follow His example. It is this grace that strengthens us to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is this grace that strengthens us to make a generous gift of ourselves to God.

In this Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we present to God this same eternal sacrifice offered on the cross, the sacrifice which was offered once for all. And in the Eucharist that we receive we are given to share in the same Body and Blood that Christ offered for us. May our communion with the Lord lead us to deeper faith and trust in God, to greater generosity and love for the one who saved us.