

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, Jun 17th 2015

Today's readings have several wonderful thoughts on generosity. Paul's teaching – "whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" – is echoed in Jonas Salk's famous observation when he received the Congressional Medal for Distinguished Civilian Achievement – "The greatest reward for doing is the opportunity to do more." There is a leveraging effect from generosity, both for the individual and the community. The individual who gives often finds the ability to give more of self because once the natural impediments to giving (such as self-centeredness, apathy, inertia, etc.) have been overcome in a few instances it is easier to find a path to give again and again.

Many times the advice given to someone who is feeling down or who is experiencing difficult times is to do something for another person – by focusing on the other we put our own problems in perspective. Ignatius taught us to pray for the gift of generosity – to give and not count the cost, to fight and not heed the wound, to toil and not rest, to labor and not seek reward other than knowing we are doing God's will.

A community that gives a little usually finds ways to give more. Think of native cultures that have ritual gift giving in times of stress or great emotion, such as after the death of a respected member of the community. Think also of communities threatened or damaged by natural disasters and how so many people rally to bring relief to those harmed. Recently in Omaha a police officer was killed while on duty. Her death was announced in the middle of a 24-hour community fundraising challenge for almost 500 charities. The police group represented in the fundraising event announced late in the afternoon that any gifts to their organization would be directed to the family of the deceased officer. Within hours the total given to that group skyrocketed from a little more than \$1,000 to almost \$70,000!

But just as giving brings a leveraging effect, it also carries a danger of braggadocio, a sense of superiority. Jesus teaches us that a good attitude in giving is more important than the size of the gift itself. God knows what we do, so what does it matter if our sisters and brothers do not know? Fr. Tony de Mello has a little story in his book "Awakening" in which a rich man gives \$1,000,000 to the Master of the monastery. The Master says "Very well, I shall accept it." The donor felt unappreciated, and suggested the Master should have expressed gratitude. But, the Master said, it is the giver who should be grateful.

This little thought for me bridges both Paul and Jesus. When we give – of self, of our time, of our treasure or talents – we acknowledge the gifts we have received. We are being grateful to God, who has been gracious and loving and giving to us, by not hoarding but by sharing our good fortune with others.

And we all have something to give. Recall another parable Jesus used on generosity, in which He counterpoints the poor widow, who gave from her own needs, and the rich man, who gave from his surplus. Empirical research findings indicate that positive attitudes toward giving, the relative size (i.e., as a percentage of disposable income) of financial gifts, and the frequency and commitment to giving is greater among those who fall into lower ends of the economic spectrum. Why? I think one reason is because they either directly or indirectly understand that giving is energizing, and synergizing, and the highest form of gratitude to our Creator God, from whom we have received so much.

You probably are aware that Jesuits don't retire, they are "missioned to pray for the church" when they leave active ministry. The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and many religious orders do something similar. It is a recognition that the individual can always give of themselves as long as they are alive. It is a beautiful coda to a service-filled life, to close with yet another unselfish act of generosity by giving to others and not dwelling on one's own shortening days.

And so my prayer today is for the grace to be aware in my giving of the loving God who gave so much to me so I can give to others.

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