

Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 10, 2024

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find it difficult to know what is truly good for me. But as a general rule, if we use our basic intuition, it would seem that if something is labeled by the experts as being "good" for us, then more should be better, right? Or if something is labeled as being "bad" for us, then we should avoid it at all costs.

And so for example, when we first heard that exercise is critical to living a healthy life, some of us immediately chose to get out on the roads and sidewalks and run for hours and hours on end, sometimes even damaging our bodies in the process.

Or when doctors first began reporting that red meat isn't as good for us as some other foods, many of us began eating chicken breasts almost every day instead, subsequently turning the enjoyment and pleasure of mealtime into somewhat of a boring routine. Or if vitamins are good for us, why not simply chew them by the handful? Or if a good night's sleep is important, why not sleep half the day away on our days off? Or if eggs or butter or whole milk or cheese can cause us problems, why not eliminate them altogether?

And how happy were we when we heard that alcohol and dark chocolate had some medicinal benefits? (And how many of us immediately upped our intake of both?) Of course, what we know about what is "good" or "bad" for us changes over the years as we learn more and more about these sorts of things. Some things were "good" and then "bad" and then "good" again. It can be pretty confusing at times.

And yet the notion that we should strive to get as much of the "good" things and deny ourselves every "bad" thing is not really what the experts are telling us. No - in almost every case, when these studies are done and

presented to the public, we are told something very simple, and yet very helpful. And it is this:

Everything in moderation.

You've heard that before, right? Everything in moderation. Three simple words, and yet an awful lot of wisdom contained in them. And at some level, it makes perfect sense, a good balance being better than any sort of extreme behavior. And so a glass of wine or a cocktail in the evening is totally okay, but a 12-pack really isn't. And enjoying some red meat a few times a week won't do that much harm (if any), but eating it 21 meals a week is probably not a good thing. And running a few miles four or five times a week is good for our heart and our overall health, but doing twenty miles a day will probably do more harm than good.

And of course, even though dark chocolate or coffee might be somewhat good for us, no one would suggest consuming them every waking minute.

Everything in moderation.

But is that true for everything? Is the "middle" way always the "best" way? Or are there any exceptions? Both in today's First Reading from the First Book of Kings, and in our Gospel passage from Mark, we are presented with two somewhat similar stories. In the first, a widow and her son appear to be near death, maybe from starvation, and yet she takes the little food she is left with and gives it to Elijah at his request. Even in her despair she is willing to look beyond herself, willing to consider the needs of others before her own. Miraculously, through the incredible goodness of God, she and her son are able to eat for a year, without running out of food.

And in the Gospel story, Jesus affirms a poor widow whom he saw putting a couple of small coins into the treasury. And even though some wealthy people put in a much greater amount, Jesus tells his disciples that the

poor widow actually gave more than others, because she gave from her poverty and not from her surplus wealth.

Everything in moderation? Is that what's going on here? Hardly. The "moderate" thing, the "measured" thing, maybe even the prudent or practical thing, would have been to simply apologize and decline to help, explaining that times were tough, and that they really didn't have anything to give. And you know what? No one would have faulted the widow either if that's the answer she gave.

In fact, virtually every single one of us in that exact same situation, would almost certainly have said something along the lines of, "Don't worry about it. I understand completely." And the reason is simple. Often, when we are in similar situations, we'd rather not give either. Give from our excess? No problem. Give from our want? Well, that's a different story altogether.

Evidently, even when it comes to the spiritual life, we like things in moderation. We just do; a little bit of praying, a little bit of giving, a few kind words, a little bit of doing the "right" thing, and a little bit of looking out for others. Not too much. We don't need to go crazy or overboard or anything like that. But not too little either. Just enough.

I guess you could say, that when it comes to loving (in all its forms), we only like to love some of the time, but not all, love in some situations, but not all, love some people, but not all. Why is that? One reason, of course, is that loving is really hard at times, in some situations being just about the last thing we want to do even though our loving God made us precisely TO love. Unfortunately, our own mixed motives, pride, selfishness, and sin get in the way.

And secondly, maybe we choose not to love too much because deep down we simply don't think we have enough to give, don't really have what it takes, or that our "love" will somehow run out. The widow in the First Reading teaches us the exact opposite. Faith, my dear friends, can

often surprise us like that. The remarkable, surprising truth is that, when it comes to the things of God, when it comes to holy things, we can give and give and give, and we will always have more to give. Our God, thankfully, is one of profound abundance. In fact there's no shortage of the love of God.

And so, that's the challenge we face today, the challenge to stop doing God-things in moderation. The challenge to accept that this church is ours and we are obliged to fully support it with our time, our treasure and our talents. (Our 3Ts). God doesn't want a lukewarm effort. God doesn't want us to always be calculating the costs. God doesn't want us to carefully measure out our kindness and mercy and compassion, as if our life is some kind of recipe in which we have to get the amounts just right.

Put simply, God wants us to stop asking ourselves, "How much can I afford to give?" Instead, he wants us to think about a different question . . .

How can I afford NOT to give? Both widows got it right. Can we get it right too?