

Winning and losing the lotteries of life

“Hey Father, if I win the big one, I’ll make sure the church gets taken care of!” My ears picked up. Maybe there was a ‘divine’ answer to the challenging financial problems faced by the church. As I soon learned a couple of weeks ago, the “big one” was a super lotto with a payout of some \$232 million! Well, such a windfall would truly change lots of lives. My mind ran the figures: a tithe (10% to the church) of \$232 million would be

Like millions of others, I began to speculate: ‘What would I do if I **personally** won \$232 million? I could pay off the bills. I could help lots of people. I could get a new car, a boat, a bicycle...take a dream trip. I would still work. I like what I am doing. I would work for free if I didn’t need a salary to live on.’ When I dared to think practically and count up all the money I could spend or give away, I discovered that I hadn’t even begun to spend but a small portion of the “big one”. And since someone has to win, I thought it might as well be my parishioner who promised to ‘take care of the church’.

So, on the evening the drawing, I waited for the phone to ring. I didn’t. As a matter of fact, we now know that the \$232 million was won by a 23 year old young rancher from South Dakota who lives with his parents. (I wonder if he has a church? Maybe he would consider the Episcopal Church?)

Truth be told, all of us fantasize about what it might be like if a huge amount of wealth were suddenly dropped in our laps. We know that this happens to some very lucky ones. However, we also know that far too many lose the lotteries of life. For every person who wins the jackpot, there are scores who have bad luck. Some fall victim to tragic accidents or random violence. Some battle disease. Some struggle with broken relationships. There are many among us who have been laid off or lost their jobs. Many of our retired elders have discovered that their life savings may no longer be adequate for their needs.

The numbers don’t lie. There has been an alarming increase in the people who need food staples from Project SHARE or who have been showing up at the Salvation Army for dinner. The CARES shelter has had more people asking for overnight shelter than they can accommodate. Even though our unemployment rate in Cumberland County remains one of the lowest in the state, we still have far too many people who find themselves suddenly out of work. All would like to win the lottery. Far too many seem to have lost.

As I thought about these challenging times, I couldn’t help but remembering a recent visit with my brother-in-law. Don had been a police chief of a Pennsylvania borough. He was respected and successful. Then about twelve years ago, things came apart for Don. He had to leave his job. His marriage fell apart. He moved by himself to Arizona to make a new beginning. He struggled to find a good job. In all of this, he battled depression. He was typically grumpy. He stopped going to church.

Two years ago, Don was diagnosed with an aggressive tongue cancer. He had chewed tobacco most of his adult life. That habit caught up with him. His oncologist chose to

fight the cancer with chemo therapy and strong radiation. Don began the treatments and within a few months, had dropped fifty pounds. He lost his hair. More importantly, he wasn't able to swallow. It was hoped that with some time and therapy he could recover the ability to swallow. It is now over two years later. Don is cancer free. He can talk. But he hasn't swallowed anything in over two years. He feeds himself by pouring cans of liquid nutrition down a tub which is connected to his stomach.

Don can't even swallow a drink of water.

Yet, Don is a different man. Gone is the depressed, grumpy guy. He never complains. He loves to cook for family and friends and watch them eat. He has reconnected with his faith and family. Why the transformation? Surely, Don lost the lottery. Why isn't he sullen, angry, and resentfully? I asked him. He told me he was just so grateful to be alive. He was grateful to be about to talk. He counts his blessings. He doesn't take anything for granted, especially the ability to eat and drink.

Our faith can help us when we lose and when we win. It helps put things in perspective. And for Christians, the story of Jesus and his undeserved suffering inspires us. If only we could understand that we have all been winners. We have all received "grace upon grace". And even when we are forced to deal with the tough times, we can live with gratitude. After all, most of us can still swallow.