



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost November 11, 2018

“The Widow of Zarephath”

(1 Kings 17:10-13)

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“So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And Elijah called to her and said, ‘Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.’ And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, ‘Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.’ And she said, ‘As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.’ And Elijah said to her, ‘Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son’” (1 Kings 17:10-13).

Collect: Almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Grant us so firmly to believe in Your Son Jesus that our faith may never be found wanting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

The prophet Elijah is running for his life. King Ahab has decided he doesn't like this guy, nor what he says. And so God has told Elijah to high tail it to Zarephath where he will find refuge and live to fight another day. Zarephath is a town about eight miles north of Sidon on the Mediterranean Coast, which means it's up there in Gentile territory, outside of Ahab's jurisdiction. There's irony here. Israel is no longer safe for a faithful prophet. But Zarephath, though teaming with Gentiles, is safe.

This text, however, really isn't about the great prophet Elijah. It's about a nameless widow living in Zarephath. She's not doing well. Severe drought has taken hold of the entire eastern Mediterranean world and has sucked the moisture out the land. Food costs have shot up through the roof. In the ancient world, whenever there's famine in the land, the first to feel the impact are the poor, the widowed and the orphans because they cannot work and have no reserves to fall back on. This woman is a poor widow who has a boy. There's no one able to help them. They are starving. There are no safety nets or federal programs, no social security.

Elijah isn't sure what he's supposed to do once he gets to Zarephath. God only said, "Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." But how is Elijah to recognize her? Elijah shows up at the city gate, dusty and thirsty. He notices a woman there gathering sticks, which already marks her as poor. Her clothing confirms her poverty. And then he gets a glance at her face: emaciated, gaunt, cadaverous. Surely the Lord would not choose her; she doesn't have enough for herself!

But one thing that makes Elijah great is that he seems to know better than others how God thinks. Or at least he allows God the freedom to surprise. So he tests things by asking the woman for a little water. At once, the woman goes to fetch it; it's a little favor.

She can at least do that. But then he adds, “While you’re at it, won’t you please bring me a little bread?” Has he forgotten she’s starving? Or does he somehow suspect she’s the one God has appointed to help him, and he’s testing the hypothesis. She says to Elijah, “As Yahweh your God lives, I have nothing, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I’m just now going to prepare this as the last meal, and after that, my son and I will die.” Notice, she has recognized Elijah as an Israelite and informs him that she too is a believer. She too follows Yahweh. Again, the irony: while the people of Israel have sold themselves over to Baal, she, in the land of Baal, has become a follower of Yahweh.

In any event, she and her boy are dying, and she seems calmly to have accepted this as God’s plan. Surely she tried everything she could think of. She begged from God, begged from neighbors. She’s gleaned from the barren fields and surrounding countryside. But now she’s out of options. She knows this is how it will end, and there’s something that seems almost heroic in her calm acquiescence. Or, perhaps she’s just dead tired. In either case, she takes it as God’s will and is ready to bear it.

Elijah says to her, “Do not fear. Go and do as you have said. But first make me a little bread and bring it to me, and *afterward* make something for yourself and your son.” Can you imagine? The audacity of this stranger to take the last bit of bread out of her mouth and her child’s mouth and put it into his mouth. But then, Elijah adds, “For thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘the jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall go empty, until the day the LORD sends rain upon the earth’, that is, until the famine is over.

If you were her, how would you have responded? I know I would have been very leery. It’s just not enough to say, “Trust me; it’s going to be fine.” I’d want some evidence this prophet knows what he’s talking about. I’d do a background check on this guy. But apparently, she does none of that. The next sentence is simply remarkable. “And she went and did as Elijah said.” What else but faith can

explain that?

Please don't write this off by saying, "Well she had nothing to lose." Remember, she's starving, and when you're starving, nothing else matters than getting food into your mouth. History tells us when you're starving, you can hardly tell right from wrong anymore. You'll do whatever's necessary. You'll lie, cheat, steal, extort, practice superstition. You'll sell yourself. You'll see others, and find some way to justify it too. So don't deny her faith. It's driving things.

Of course, we know how it goes from here. She and her household (including Elijah) ate for many days. "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty." It sounds like the feeding of the five thousand, right? However much bread he broke off for distribution, there was always more to break off.

Now the question is, "What does this ancient account have to do with us, today?" A few things come to mind. Actually, quite a few; ten things come to mind. I rarely do it this way because at the seminary, they told us not to, but here's the list of ten. Most of them are short.

- First this, in a wicked, harsh, and hostile world, God watches over those who belong to him. He certainly did for Elijah, and the widow, and her son. It's good for us to keep that in mind too. He watches over you.
- Second, it's usually a good thing to give to those who need and ask for our help. If they abuse our generosity, that's on their consciences. But by helping them, we've done what God asks us to do. Remember the Good Samaritan.
- Third, don't ever write off any group, place or country. We have brothers and sisters in the faith all over the world, also in the most nasty, brutish and hostile places. We all know that, but it's good to remember the communion of saints.
- Fourth, if you ever find yourself destitute, your best bet is to seek help from those who are poor. I read that some place. It sounds true and I locked it away for safe

keeping. It's certainly true in our text.

- Fifth, if famine ever hits the land, there are lots of geese out there on golf courses in the pond in front of the hospital. They should be the first to feel the effects of famine, not the widows and orphans. They poor need our assistance.
- Sixth, a botany professor at UW-Madison once told me man can live indefinitely on milk and potatoes. I also locked that one away for safe keeping. Thanks be to God, I've never had to test it. We live in a verdant, productive land, not given to years of drought. Again, thanks be to God! We did not earn this.
- Seventh, and this one is longer. Of all people this widow is the most unlikely to offer refuge and hospitality to Elijah. Why didn't God choose a person of means? Of course, we know God used this as an opportunity to save this widow and her son from starvation. If you keep reading in this chapter, you'll see he also bolsters their faith, which is no small deal, especially when everyone around them is worshipping Baal. But I think there's also something else going on here. If you're like me, sometimes you're unable to identify with some of the heroes of the faith in Scripture. They have such exceptional gifts and strength of faith that we find ourselves unable to relate. Elijah or John the Baptist for example. They leave me cold; they are so different from me that I can hardly identify with them. But then the Lord puts other examples of great faith into the Scriptures, such as this widow in Zarephath, and the other nameless widow in the Gospel lesson who threw her last two mites into the Temple treasury. Neither one of them is wealthy. Neither is influential. We don't even know their names. They are just average women suffering from crushing poverty. And yet, look at their generosity prompted by faith! You see what God's doing here? God is robbing us of any excuses. We must admit that their faith and their generosity could and should be ours too. It makes me think of what Paul

wrote in 1 Corinthians: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (v. 27). In choosing these two widows, God chose what is foolish, weak and lowly, to shame you and me. They gave from their need. We give from our surplus. Their giving would have a profound impact on our lives. Our giving doesn’t really do that. Their giving was sacrificial. It hurt them. Our giving should be sacrificial too; it should hurt. Remember, if you cannot give it away, you don’t own it anymore. It owns you.

- Eighth, their gifts didn’t amount to much – a handful of flour for the one, two mites for the other. And yet, both gave more from their poverty than we do from our abundance. (Jesus’ words, not mine. I don’t like them either, but he did say them.) Luther also said, “We should never measure our generosity by what we give, but by what we have left.” (I also wish Luther hadn’t said that.)
- Ninth, in both our Old Testament lesson and the Gospel lessons, God lifts up the sacrificial giving of these two poor widows. Their sacrificial giving points to our Savior who also gave sacrificially. Like the widows, Jesus kept on giving even when there was nothing left to give. For us and for our salvation, Jesus held nothing back. Such is his love for us that he determined no price was too costly. Dying on the cross, Jesus gave it his all. It wasn’t sensible. It wasn’t prudent. It wasn’t measured. It wasn’t cautious or reasonable. And yet he gave and gave and keeps on giving until we are assured of forgiveness and salvation.
- Finally, and most importantly, please remember you cannot give your way into heaven, even if you gave everything away. Heaven is first and foremost a gift given by God’s grace in Jesus. Besides, what do you

have that you think God needs? You think he would he sell heaven to you in order to get your little treasure? It'd be like trying to convince Warren Buffet to give you his entire estate in exchange for a few dollar bills that you're waving in front of his face. You cannot sway God one way or another with money. He already loves you fully, completely, unconditionally. And he has already pledged and given to you the kingdom of heaven. It comes with Jesus. You cannot buy it with your handful of flour or with your two mites. But with your money, you can thank Jesus and praise him, and you can express your trust in him. With your money you can serve others while also serving him.

Both these widows gave even when it really hurt. Their gifts point to Jesus who also gave when it really hurt. Thanks be to God. Amen.

