

Sermon for Nov 7 2021
"Trusting God with everything"

Today's readings:
1 Kings 17:8–16
Hebrews 9:24–28
Mark 12:38–44

Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], "Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have **appointed** a widow there to feed you." So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks.

Let's look at the story and take in the events, shall we?

At this point we know two things...

First, God told Elijah to go to Zarephath, which is a Gentile city, by the way. Elijah might have expected a devout widow from a Judean city to provide room and board, but expecting something like that from a Gentile woman, probably not... but he traveled there anyway. And, second, God told Elijah that he had already set up housing and provision for him, in the form of a widow who would take care of him... So far, so good. He arrives and there she is gathering sticks outside the city gates, free wood, most likely to build a fire.

I think that if we look at it from this perspective then what follows might be understood, at least from Elijah's perspective. *This is clearly the woman that God has appointed to feed me so... let's test that theory..*

Now, what the woman's view of all this might be... we have no idea. Likely she isn't quite up to speed on God's plans for her. At least not yet.

And he called to her and said, "**Pray (please/prithee)** bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink."

Remember this is a time of drought. By the word of Elijah, against Ahab and Jezebel, against the prophets of Baal, and against Israel's apostasy, there would be NO WATER, no rain, not even a dew, until the curse was lifted. So, simply asking for a glass of water might be considered something of a hardship...

And as she was on her way to bring it to him...

This sentence indicates a willingness to serve him. Whatever else is going on in her head, her actions are indicative of service and compliance. This MIGHT be in part to the culture of the day and the subservient role of a woman in that society, But human nature being human nature,

EVEN if she DID think of this request in less than positive terms... either she doesn't say anything and simply complies, or she answers him in the affirmative and immediately goes about the task. We might find what she does a LITTLE surprising, but to this point, it's not ridiculously presumptuous. She might just be a nice person, helpful by nature. And so, perhaps, she isn't disinclined to acquiesce to his request.

Is this the woman God appointed or not? Let's find out.

What follows is clearly crossing a line... It's one thing to ask for a drink of water; it's quite another to impose upon her to make him a meal... with her own, two little hands.

If she is the woman God has appointed for this mission, what follows will make it clear...

And so, he called to her as she was going, and said, "While you are at it, would you also bring me a morsel of bread in your hands; please?"

I have never thought of this question before this week... I wonder, was Elijah afraid to ask her that question?

I bet, up until now, you might have thought of Elijah as bold as brass. That it didn't matter to him whether-or-not what he was saying sounded presumptuous and tactless. But I assure you that every servant of God that I know gets a knot in their stomach before asking someone to please SERVE in God's kingdom. Like the Sunday school superintendent, asking someone in the congregation, "Will you be willing to teach Sunday school this year?" or the head usher asking to help seat people in worship or a choir director asking people if they might like to sing, or a congregational president asking someone to serve on the council or board, or even a pastor asking someone if they might chair a committee or even... lead a prayer. We are so afraid of rejection, let me tell you. Maybe not all of us, but I think most of us. Is Elijah afraid, I wonder? We don't see it translated in the text... too bad... But if we read the Hebrew I think it's possible. The word *PLEASE* is present there in BOTH requests in the original language. (Why it doesn't get translated confuses me... because the word is there. Both TIMES.)

I remember 35 years ago, when I was asked to teach Sunday school. Or actually I wasn't asked... my wife was.

Tom Sarella was the superintendent of our church. He needed to get some people willing to teach. My wife was, I thought, an obvious choice. I was washing dishes when we got the phone call. Remember, we used to have telephones that hung on the wall. Ours was in the kitchen...

RING!

"Hello..."

"Hi, this is Tom Sarella from Zion Lutheran Church, is your wife home?"

"Just a second... CHRIS, Telephone!"

"Who IS it?"

"Tom Sarella."

Looking back, that in itself was unusual. Chris must have been dealing with something or she would have come to the phone. And if she had come to the phone, I think my life might have been very different today.

“What does he want?”

“She can’t come to the phone at the moment, Tom, can I give her a message?”

Clearly, Tom didn’t want to “give her a message;” it’s too easy to say no to a message... but he gave it to me anyway.

“I was wondering if she would be willing to teach Sunday school this year?”

Now, I know my wife, and I knew that the very LAST thing that she wanted to do was to teach Sunday school. At least at that time, she was a solid NO! So I relayed the message because I already knew the answer...

“Tom wants to know if you want to teach Sunday school?”

“NO!”

“Sorry, Tom. She said NO.”

His disappointment was obvious. I think he must have been running out of options. And then he said something that I don’t even think *he* had considered until that very moment...

“What about you? Would you be willing to teach Sunday school?”

Me? HECK NO....

But that’s not what came out of my mouth. I have no idea what possessed me. To this day I look back at it and wonder, as if it were an out of body experience... but I heard myself saying,

“Sure, Tom. I’d do that.”

In my head, I’m shouting “are you crazy?” But Tom asked what grade level would I be willing to teach, and I heard myself answering calmly... what about sixth grade?

I heard Tom’s voice get really happy... like a kind of relieved sorta happy... “That would be fantastic.”

YEAH... clearly NO ONE WANTED to teach 6th Grade. He couldn’t believe his good fortune that he just got some sucker to ASK for it... But that was me. It was because of my adventures teaching Sunday school that later on Pastor Mengsteab asked me to consider seminary. So here I am... thank you, Tom Sarella.... You were brave enough, or maybe just foolish enough to ask me to serve.

I have to give people their props for facing down their fear enough to ask others to serve in Christ’s kingdom. And for all of you who have answered yes... Thank you from the bottom of my

heart. And those who get the privilege of being asked... consider if God has appointed you for this service before you say no. Pray about it, please.

Back to our scripture.

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."

We are given the words that the widow spoke, but we are not given any clue as to *how* she spoke them. Except that maybe in Elijah's answer to her, not to be afraid. So perhaps there is a note of fear in how she answers him. Fear for tomorrow. Fear that she is not even able to take care of herself and child, let alone him. How ever she speaks these words, with a sense of fatalism, perhaps? With emotions so broken that she doesn't even have the reserve capacity to be angry or indignant, but just enough to lay out the facts... *I can't do it... I'm down to nothing... all that is left to me is to eat up what remains and lay down and die. What more can you ask of me?*

That might be possible... although, I think most of us would read this as her giving Elijah a piece of her mind. Like....*Do you have ANY IDEA, what I've been dealing with? Do you even have a clue what you're asking? Who you are asking it from? Let me tell you... I've got NOTHING... NOTHING... and what I do have, you expect me to give to you? Let me tell you where I am in life... I'm ready to give up. In fact I was going home to do just THAT.*

I wonder if that's when the light went on for Elijah? *THIS is the woman You set up to provide for me? Aha! It must be that You desire to save her. And so You kill two birds with one stone... She takes care of me... and You take care of her. So be it.*

And that's when Elijah said to her,

"Do not fear; go and do as you have said..."

I can't imagine anything else that he might have said that would have set her back and made her listen...

But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.

If this didn't make her wonder at what was happening I should be very surprised... HOW? It must have been written into her very face.

I will tell you how... For thus says the Lord the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth.'

I suppose we could speculate all day on why she agrees and follows his instructions... But I have to wonder if it wasn't out of curiosity. NOTE: She swears by Yahweh saying, "As the Lord YOUR GOD Lives..."

She must have been a believer. A Gentile yes, but she acknowledges that the LORD is God, and that He lives...

It isn't her

God, it is the God of HIM... His People, the God of Israel... I think it would be very awkward for her to say this as meaning... That God of YOURS, that God that YOU believe in, (not me). It makes much more sense to hear this as saying that as Yahweh, the God of Israel lives... meaning I swear also by this GOD... and as This God lives, here are MY PLANS... To which Elijah answers... as this God lives... here are HIS plans, for YOU, and for me and for all of Israel and all the people, as well. In effect saying, stick with me, kid, the Lord will take care of us both...

That by itself sounds plausible to me but what makes it even MORE plausible is to consider what is said as coming from the realization that she is talking with one of God's prophets... As the Lord YOUR God lives...

And while it's not spoken here, it is frequently enough in other places where those who speak with the Lord's Anointed will say "I perceive you are a prophet." And in the other instances, I can recall, off the top of my head, this is usually spoken by Gentile women. And although it is NOT said here, I should wonder if that explains what happens next...

And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

TRUST the LORD. It's a THEME through the entire Bible.

Trust and Faith are two words that go together, but they do NOT mean the same thing. They are closely related but there is a distinct difference between them. Like faith and hope... If we understand them by their opposites.

Faith addresses unbelief. Hope addresses despair. What does TRUST address? What would the opposite of trust be? It's like asking what is the opposite of love... So many would say that hate is the opposite of love. But truly the opposite of love is indifference... Love and hate are both passionate emotions; indifference is not only without love but it is without passion as well. And so I put forth for your consideration the idea that **the opposite of trust is disobedience**. If I want you to trust me... I want you to do what I think is best for you to do... and TRUST that it will meet, right and salutary, even if it doesn't look like it, in the moment. If one chooses not to trust, then one doesn't do what is asked. I think we call that disobedience, In any case faith doesn't require any action on YOUR part, in the sense that you DO anything to believe. On the other hand, TRUST usually means taking some kind of action.

For example, that scene in "Aladdin" where he asks Jasmine... "Do you trust me?" as he takes her hand and asks her to step on his magic carpet. She answers a labored... yyyees.... As if she really isn't too sure that she does. But never-the-less... she steps up on the carpet and goes for a ride.

The widow is taking a risk; she is trusting Elijah as the prophet of God, the voice of Yahweh. And her LIFE will depend on God's promises. She goes ALL in on the bet... That's trust... That's what's ultimately going on in the Gospel reading today, too.

And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, equaling a penny. And so, he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Boshoven's rule includes this observation... Whenever Jesus talks about money... it's NEVER about money. It's always about faith... fidelity and TRUST.

It isn't that the widow put in more MONEY than all the others. It's that what she put into the offering was her entire LIFE... She BET IT ALL... on a sure thing.

Giving out of our abundance is using our resources well, but it isn't trusting in God. We trust in God when we cash in our whole lives and put this into the offering and service of our Lord. Her poverty is that she has nothing to begin with. What she offers is her faith, her hope and love... all that she has to live on.