

Feeding the Other (6/10/07-Emory Presbyterian Church)

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Today's Old Testament and New Testament lessons bear some striking similarities. In both, a powerful figure appears on the scene. In both, the powerful person is on the road, traveling away from his home. In both, he encounters a widow who has a son. In both, something miraculous happens. By reading these two stories and by focusing on what they have in common, we might come away from them, celebrating God's care for those who suffer or who are in special need. We could marvel at the existence of truly extraordinary people, such as Elijah, and, even more, Jesus, people who can bring God's power and presence into our ordinary lives.

Yet, to think about the features common to these stories makes it difficult to understand the special features of each one. So, this morning, I want to focus on just one of them, the Old Testament text about Elijah and a widow.

In order to understand and appreciate this scene, we need at least four pieces of background information. **First**, our little scene is part of a longer narrative about Elijah. And that longer narrative has just begun. At the beginning of 1 Kings 17, Elijah had proclaimed that Syria-Palestine would suffer a terrible drought. God then commanded Elijah to head out into the countryside where he would be fed by some ravens, admittedly an odd choice for God's waitstaff because ravens were thought to be unclean (Lev 11:15). Since the drought had just started, Elijah was still able to find some water to drink in one of the seasonal streams. Then the stream dried up. And it is at that point our story begins. Bottom line: The setting for this story is one of drought.

Second, Elijah is a mysterious character. He is introduced as Elijah the Tishbite, but no one really knows what Tishbite means. Since he receives words from God (17:2; 17:8) and since prophets in other biblical books pronounce words from God, Elijah seems to have something to do with things prophetic. In the next scene after ours, the same widow calls him “a man of God,” which really means someone who possesses god-like powers. Bottom line: Elijah is mysterious, prophetic, and powerful.

Third, our scene is set in a small town, Zarephath, which lay ten miles south of Sidon, a major Phoenician port on the Mediterranean coast. This was not an Israelite city. It was inhabited by those who worshipped gods other than Yahweh, Israel’s God. These people would have recognized the power of a prophet like Elijah, but they would not have shared Elijah’s religious or ethical views. Further, it was probably difficult for Elijah and the woman to understand each other, since the Phoenician language was different from Hebrew. Bottom line: our scene places Elijah in a non-Israelite town.

Fourth, the woman in this scene is presented to us as a widow. That is the first thing we hear about her. Widows in ancient Near Eastern societies occupied an extremely vulnerable status. In these societies, men controlled much of the public power. If a woman’s husband died, she no longer had an advocate in legal, economic or religious spheres. Many of these ancient societies recognized the plight of widows and orphans, even making special provisions for them. But the very fact that such measures were taken indicates how vulnerable widows were in these ancient patriarchal cultures. Bottom line: the woman in this scene is living on life’s edge.

Now to the story itself. At the outset, God tells Elijah, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” So, off he goes, soon arriving at the city gate. These ancient

gates were not only places where people entered the city; they were also places where important economic and legal transactions took place. As a result, lots of people passed through these gates each day. Our widow apparently hoped that a few pieces of wood that people were bringing in to the city for their cooking fires might have dropped from their baskets. She apparently was unable to leave the city in search of such fuel for her own oven.

Elijah orders her to bring him a small cup of water. Amazingly, she quietly obeys. She heads off to the city well to draw some water. Perhaps we are to assume that Elijah's God had, in fact, commanded her to feed him and that she was simply following those orders. Then, as she was leaving, Elijah commanded her to bring him a bit of bread as well. At this point, she turned and said, "As Yahweh your God lives," Those are remarkable words. That is the way a person took an oath in the ancient world. Normally, they swore by their own god. We might expect her to say, "As Ba'al, my God, lives...." Here, she swears by Elijah's god: "As Yahweh your god lives....." In so doing, this poor widow protests not only to Elijah but also to Elijah's God, who had commanded her to feed the powerful man. She said: "I have nothing cooked. My pantry is virtually empty. There is just enough food for my son and me to have one last paltry meal. Once we have eaten that, we will then die. And you want me to bring you some bread?!" What she doesn't say out loud but what she surely means is: "I'm not going to bring you anything to eat or drink."

That is a withering speech. How can someone powerful like Elijah order around a powerless person in order to save his own life, when she herself is near death? How can God ask a poor, starving widow to feed Elijah? The text offers no good answers.

Elijah and God now have to take this widow seriously. She has, in effect, said. “Look, I am going to feed my son and myself before I do anything else.” Elijah responds with a slightly less imperious tone. “Don’t be afraid. Go, prepare food, and eat, as you have said, but first prepare something for me.” Elijah must have been very hungry since he continues to be utterly oblivious about the hunger of this woman and her son. He wants his food first.

Finally, Elijah and God play their trump card. They offer the woman a prophetic oracle. “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel. Your jars of oil and meal will not be empty until the drought has been broken.” This oracle does two things. It obviously offers a promise of food. But it also addresses the widow’s earlier statement about Yahweh as “Elijah’s God.” In effect, Elijah says, this Yahweh is not simply my god; Yahweh is the God of Israel. Moreover, this God of Israel can act powerfully outside Israel. Yahweh can provide food for a Phoenician pantry.

After hearing not only Elijah’s command but also his way of talking about God and God’s promise, the woman went and did what Elijah had ordered her to do. The narrative concludes with a report that neither the jug of meal nor the jug of oil failed. End of story.

So what are we to make of these nine verses? We can begin by contemplating the three primary characters: Elijah, the widow, and God. Elijah doesn’t sound like a very nice guy. He keeps demanding food from a poor woman. The widow is appropriately feisty, when confronting this foreign itinerant. God is ordering people around—Elijah to go to Zarephath, the widow to feed Elijah. Tough times are obviously having an effect on all of these characters. Each one has a bit of an edge.

Our scene is a story about survival in a time of dire drought. Elijah needed food; the widow and her son needed food. Yet, Elijah and this woman were about as different as people could be. Consider the differences:

Elijah was an Israelite, the woman was a Phoenician

Elijah had a name, the woman was anonymous

Elijah was a male, she was a female

Elijah was single, the woman had been married

Elijah had no child; the woman had a son

Elijah was powerful, the woman was vulnerable

Elijah worshipped Yahweh; the woman probably worshipped Baʿal.

Elijah and the woman personified difference. When they looked each other in the face, they could see “the Other.”

These sorts of differences are not limited to the ancient world. All of us live in a world of comparable diversity. Each of us has, I am sure, encountered someone who is our Other, someone who is different from you in many ways. If you are a man, she would be a woman. If you are single, he might be someone who is married. If you are older, she might be someone who is younger. If you are financially well off, he might be someone without a lot of money. If you are a Christian, she might be a Muslim. If you think of yourself as upper class, he might think of himself as part of the lower class. If you speak English, she would speak Spanish. If you are from the United States, he might be from Korea.

Elijah and the woman — these people were “the other” to each other. According to the story, they were testy with each other. But due to the drought, both were hungry.

Despite their “otherness,” they fed each other. She fed him; he fed her. They met each other’s most basic needs during a time of drought and famine. She fed him from her meager supply of meal and oil. He provided for her out of the riches of his miraculous power. The extraordinary person and the ordinary person offered each other mutual assistance. As the story itself says, “she as well as he ate for many days.” The amazing element that lies just below the surface of this story is that these two people who personified difference fed each other. That may be even more of a miracle than the jars of oil and meal that were never empty.

This story, probably written in what archaeologists call the Iron Age, comes from long ago and far away. And yet it is surprisingly contemporary — not just because people continue to suffer from drought and famine, not just because we all confront “the Other” in our lives. It is a story about the way in which people can feed each other, both literally and symbolically. We Christians recognize the centrality of that image, since the Lord’s Supper is one of our most important religious acts. People who personify the Other gather around that table to feed each other. All are fed. Just as with Elijah and the widow, we eat and drink the same food. We eat food that God has provided. The Lord’s Supper, as was the food in our story, will always be available to us. What this story helps us see about the Lord’s supper is how different people — ordinary people, extraordinary people — feed each other. We like an Elijah can be imperious. We like the widow can be testy. But in that humanness and in that diversity, we retain the capacity to provide food and drink for each other.

As most of you know, the Reverend Jill Oglesby Evans devotes the summer months to preaching about saints, extraordinary people, during this time that the liturgical

year knows as ordinary time — the period between Pentecost and Advent. She suggested that I try to work with that theme. I, of course, responded that I would dutifully study the biblical texts and offer whatever wisdom they might provide. To this point, I have avoided talking about saints. But now let's try. Is there a saint in this story about Elijah and the widow? I suspect many readers might nominate Elijah. He after all is the one who received the divine words; he is the one who predicted a miracle. But can we make a case that the widow is a saint? Does this impoverished woman, who is about to eat her last meal, but who at story's end offers Elijah a scrap of food, even before she feeds herself and her son, does she too deserve to be called a saint? I suspect this may be a story about two saints.

To the glory of God. Amen