

“Generosity in the Midst of Scarcity”

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**Sunday, June 5, 2016
Third Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: Galatians 1:11-24 and 1 Kings 17:8-16

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me.

Galatians 1:11-24

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, "God now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

1 Kings 17:8-16

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you feed us the living word to nourish us, to sustain us, to challenge us. Be with us now as we hear your word this day and the words that are upon my heart. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

This morning the chapter of 1 Kings opens with the sudden appearance of the prophet Elijah. Elijah's call is to challenge the kingdom of Israel, known at that time as the Northern Kingdom. In matters of faith, they have gone off the rails. Their king, Ahab, is being encouraged to worship another god by his foreign-born wife, Jezebel. She worships Ba'al and seeks to put shrines to Ba'al up all over Israel. The reason for that is that gods were considered local and had power over a particular place. So by building shrines in various places around the kingdom, it would make a case for his presence and Baal's power in Israel.

Now God knows what's going on and God is not pleased. So now, Elijah, one of a long line of prophets, is sent on a mission to challenge the people to remind them that God is the God above all and any other gods. Ba'al was worshipped as the god of rain and vegetation, and to prove that Ba'al has no power, Elijah predicts a long drought. Having stated his challenge, Elijah retreats to the desert to hide and finds a wadi to provide his water. God provides food by sending ravens who bring meat and bread. But as the drought continues, the water in the wadi dries up and he has to move on. God sends him into a foreign territory, to Jezebel's home town, in fact. There Elijah is to find a particular woman who will provide food and water. She is the epitome of someone in need, a widow with a son in the midst of a drought. With little food to be found, she and her son are close to starvation. As Elijah enters the town, he sees her and asks for water and she leaves to get some, and as she does so, he also asks her for some food. It is then she tells him her story. She has been scrounging for a little bit of wood to make a little fire to make a little food with what little she has left. The stage is certainly set for something to happen. And so it does.

Elijah senses her fear and hesitancy and responds with words of promise and hope. *Fear not*, he says, *do as I say and my God will provide not only for this meal but also for many a meal to come.* Now we can assume this woman is a worshipper of Baal given where she lives. But suddenly she takes a leap of faith. She who has so little takes what she has and makes him a cake and brings it to him. Then with what little is left, she makes food for her son and her household. And it comes to pass as Elijah has said. That which was barely enough, a jar of meal and a jug of oil, continue to flow with nourishment until the drought is over.

Now scholars feel this story reflects a number of other stories in the Bible, such as Jesus approaching the woman at the well in a foreign land and asking her for water. While she draws water for quenching his thirst, he offers her the living waters that quench her search for meaning. Or another story about God providing the people in the wilderness with manna for food for the day. God promises enough for each day and promises more for tomorrow. At first they were anxious and fearful and they took more manna than they needed. What they found out was that the next day it had rotted. They had to learn to trust God day by day.

So what made this woman willing to do it? She was so concerned and anxious. What gives her the courage? What helps her to overcome her fear? Does she think she has nothing to lose? Or do Elijah's words and presence offer enough hope to enable her to overcome fear. When I reflected on this passage, I started thinking about a book that we have discussed in our Tuesday morning group: Ken Bailey's book Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes. In a portion of that book, he talks about the underlying meanings and understandings of the Lord's Prayer, and in particular the line *give us this day our daily bread*. He said it's really impossible for us to know the origin and the meaning of the Greek word *epiousous*, or daily as give us our daily bread. He said this word in Greek, *epiousous*, is the only time it's used in the Bible. He said, usually scholars will take a word and examine it in the context of other verses to gain some insight. But there is no other option. There is no way to compare this to other places. So he said, the early church writers divided into two different camps. One group thought it meant about a particular point in time. For them *this day* wasn't interpreted as *today*. Some thought it meant *tomorrow*. But it meant a point in time reflecting on the passage about manna in the wilderness and trusting that there will be bread for tomorrow.

The second group is focuses on another aspect. For them the questions that is being asked is what is the amount that would be considered enough to be daily bread? Was it just enough for one meal to stay alive for that day, as in only enough to just get by? Or was it more? Bailey says if it's only a subsistence amount, how comforting is that? Is God a God of scarcity or of generosity? And for that reason he felt the second interpretation was the most likely. It comes from the old Syriac church that uses the earliest known translations of the Greek New Testament. The meaning would be more like this: *Give us this day the bread we need, enough to keep us from the fear that we would run out.* He says this really makes sense. Enough bread to keep us from the fear that we would run out. 1 He says, "one of the most crippling fears for all of us is the fear of not having enough, especially not enough to eat. We think things are okay today but we worry about the future. What if I lose my job? What if the kids get sick? How will we survive?" He thinks that "what Jesus is trying to tell the disciples is to pray for deliverance from the fear or anxiety that there will not be enough. Give us bread for today means not only this day but having the confidence to think there will be enough for tomorrow. 2

So returning to the passage from 1 Kings, what does it teach us about faith? Maybe that one of the gifts of faith is that faith can help us let go of that fear, enabling us to share out of a sense of generosity. Remember at first the widow hesitated. Then she was fed the good news. Elijah's invitation to her to trust in God is not one based on judgment or intimidation. It's one based on hope. He is trying to tell her the God I worship is a different God, one who cares and loves and feeds and nourishes in body and spirit. By his words, Elijah offers her the nourishment of the Spirit. He offers her the bread of life. In turn, she offers him bread for his body. So maybe the miracle of this story is not that there is suddenly an unending supply of food, but in the moment when one with so little is able to overcome the fear and is willing to share. Her actions remind us that even those in need can make a difference with a generous spirit. Perhaps it is a reminder that God is present in Christ among us when we share in the breaking of the bread.

And that is what Bailey continues to point out about the power of the Lord's Prayer--that when we ask for bread it is not *my daily bread* but *our daily bread*. It's an act of community. And to illustrate this point he shared a powerful story that he had learned from Mother Teresa. She said *I will never forget the night an older gentleman came to our house and asked if we could help a family with eight children who had not eaten for some time. I gathered some rice and went to the house and I could see the faces of the children were filled with hunger. The woman took the rice from my hands and divided it into two and went out with one bowl. When she returned, I asked her where she had gone and she gave me a very simple answer. They are hungry also. They was the family next door. Mother Teresa said what struck me was that she knew the people next door were hungry, too. And from her perspective it was not just her rice but our rice--that the rice should be shared with them also.* 3 Generosity in the midst of scarcity is a testimony to the understanding that the body of Christ is truly made up of more than one body. But it can also be a challenge. As one scholar wrote, *We live in a world full of fear. People are afraid of rising prices and falling incomes. We are afraid of immigrants and disease and forest fires and drought and drugs and tornadoes and hurricanes and terrorists. The list is long and growing and in the midst of all this fear we struggle.* 4

The good news for us is this: "In a world so focused on fear, the spirit of God moves among us still, encouraging us not to focus on what makes us afraid but what gives us new life and new hope. The Spirit intervenes to help us overcome the cycle of fear and violence with words and deeds of compassion and healing. The story of Elijah is one where he offers the nourishment of the good news and he is returned with nourishment as an act of hope." The story is about the ongoing movement of the Spirit of God through the "patriarchs and matriarchs and prophets and seers and women and men who spoke truth to power through kings and queens and shepherd boys and Jesus of Nazareth," 5 whose words told us who we are and what we are called to do, and whose life showed us the way. And indeed, God continues to move through us as the body of Christ inspiring compassion, enabling us to work to overcome fear with love, sorrow with joy, and death with

So may we trust in the one who is risen and by the power of the Spirit moves through you and through me, calling us to be a source of healing and hope in the lives of others today and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Amen.

- 1) Bailey, Ken Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, pp. 119-121.
- 2) Ibid. pp. 120-121.
- 3) Ibid. p. 122.
- 4) Chilton, Delmer L. The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, Lectionary Lab as found on Textweek.com. for articles on the lectionary readings for Sunday, June 5, 2016.
- 5) Ibid.