

DANGEROUS GIVING

1 Kings 17:8-16
Mark 12:38-44

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Stewardship Sunday

TEXT: 1 Kings 17:13 “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.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to give to support the ministry of our church in ways that nourish our faith in God’s ability to bless us and use us to fulfill God’s purposes.

In today’s two Bible stories, we meet two widows. First, the prophet Elijah asked a widow in the town of Zarepath for water and food during a severe drought in the region – a drought which Elijah himself announced to wicked King Ahab. (1 Kings 17:1) Second, Jesus watched a widow woman put money in the temple treasury and recognized her gift as more extravagant than the gifts of all the high-capacity donors. My sermon considers the implications for us, and in particular for our financial support for our church, of both of these stories. It may appear to be a happy convergence for me as a preacher that these texts show up on our Stewardship Sunday. Let’s see how useful they are as guides for our giving in our time.

When Elijah met the widow of Zarepath, she was literally at the end of her rope. The deadly famine and her pre-existing poverty had brought her and her son to the edge of starvation. Elijah took notice of her as she was gathering firewood to cook her and her son’s last supper before they died of starvation. What she didn’t know was that Elijah’s God had selected her for an important ministry. God had chosen her to take care of Elijah until God let the rain return.

Think about this, and about what it tells us about our God: Instead of tapping a person with the means to offer room and board for Elijah, God chose a person with zero material resources. Instead of tapping an Israelite who already believed in the same God as Elijah, God sent the prophet to a foreign city and recruited someone who probably didn’t believe in Elijah’s God. What kind of God makes such irrational decisions?

First, Elijah asked the widow to bring him some water, which she was able and willing to do. But when he said, how about a bite to eat? – that crossed a line. You stupid man of God, she must have thought. Don’t you realize that the famine has left us without food, at least left poor widows like me without food? In our world today, about 155 million people are experiencing severe food insecurity. That’s a huge increase just since 2020. More people are dying of hunger-related issues than are dying from COVID-19.¹ Who would be so rude as to ask any of today’s starving people to share what little they have with a complete stranger?

¹www.oxfam.org

Anyway, of course Elijah knew about the famine. He was the one who announced it— it was God’s strategy for knocking some sense into the rulers in Israel, who were investing themselves and their country in the worship of false gods. It is likely that Elijah was in foreign territory to escape the wrath of evil king Ahab and his Sidonian wife Jezebel. But Elijah knew something else: he knew that God had devised a plan for his care during the divinely ordained drought. And he knew that plan involved recruiting a widow who lived in Zarepath, a coastal city in modern-day Lebanon, north of Israel. How he knew that this widow, the one gathering sticks at the town gate, was the one God had selected, God only knows.

In response to his asking for something to eat, the woman described her desperate circumstances. To which Elijah replied, “Feed me first, then, see what the Lord can do.” What the Lord was going to do was to turn her jar of meal and her jug of oil into containers that would not empty as long as the drought lasted. Which to me sounds like a ridiculous magic trick.

Stop right there. You know that today, we’re celebrating the results of your financial support for the ministry of this church in the coming year. How would you have responded if our campaign had insisted that our support for this church’s ministries take precedence over our other financial obligations, including our ability to feed and shelter our children? Would you be able to trust an assurance that putting the church first would bless you with sufficient resources to sustain life for yourself and for your children? Elijah asked the widow to give dangerously, giving which risked losing what meager resources she had. It doesn’t seem like a story which models a way to raise support for our church and its ministry.

Let’s fast forward a millenium, and check out the widow who was giving what Jesus knew was “all she had to live on” to the temple. This story is frequently used as a basis for a stewardship sermon. The preacher holds up this account of a poor person’s extravagant generosity as an example all of us ought to follow. If we all gave the way the widow gave, the preacher could say, we’d have more than we need to make this ministry a real success. Really? Is this what Jesus expects of us, to “put in everything [we have], all [we] have to live on?”

I’m not so sure. Think about it for a minute: if Jesus is commending the widow, if he is holding up her gift of all she had as an example for his followers, don’t you find that at least a bit troubling? Few commentators do. Most want to contrast her extravagance with the wealthier donor’s calculated donations. One I read suggests that the widow’s gift prefigures Jesus’ gift of his life, which, in Mark’s

account, was just about to take place.

Maybe. But that doesn't address the fact that the widow's gift has left her literally penniless. Ched Myers, in his masterful commentary on Mark, insists that Jesus was not commending the widow's gift. Rather, he was pointing out that the temple had robbed her of her means of livelihood.² He was lamenting a system that promoted this excessive giving and exploited people for the sake of the temple and its practices. The clue lies in Jesus' warning about the scribes, "who devour widow's houses." This poor widow was more than devoured by her gift to the temple. Not only that, but the story following the account of the widow's gift, which is appointed as the gospel passage for next Sunday, depicts Jesus' disciples admiring the temple, but Jesus predicting its destruction. Why would Jesus commend a gift to a doomed institution?

So there goes my chance to use a Bible story to wring some more money out of you. I'm relieved to be shed of an interpretation of this story which does little to promote healthy giving, and to embrace an interpretation of this story which cautions us not to turn our church—today's poor parallel to the Jerusalem temple— as some sort of 'be all and end all' expecting us to impoverish ourselves so it can survive.

Which brings us back asking again how these stories do inform our giving. Here's what I think. The giving that both widows did had everything to do with faith. You could say that it took faith for them to give the way they did, and you'd be right. The widow of Zarepath had to have at least an inkling of faith that Elijah's assurance about her meal and her oil was trustworthy. Likewise, the widow Jesus saw had to have faith that the coins she dropped in the offering box were not the last coins she'd ever have. Let me say this: faith comes into play only when our giving is dangerous. If we have money to spare, no faith is needed to donate money that we don't need. And no faith is needed if we give cautiously. These stories are inviting us to give in such a way that faith is involved. But I see the faith aspect of these stories another way. It wasn't just that a measure of faith was a prerequisite for these two women to give what they gave. I think their giving actually created faith. Not until they offered their dangerous gift was their faith made real.

Put yourself in the place of the widow of Zarepath. You've heard Elijah's assurance that she wouldn't run out of provisions, and honestly, it sounds pretty

²Myers, Ched, Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1990. P. 321f.

ridiculous. But, you think, what do I have to lose? So you drop the dough in your pan and watch it sizzle. When it's done and you take it out, you have one last chance to keep it for yourself and your son. You look at the jar and the jug, and yes, they are empty. With your heart in your throat, you offer the cake to the prophet. He prays a blessing over the cake and eats it right in front of you. As he takes his first bite, I'll bet you look again at your jar and jug. And, right then, faith happens! Faith that wasn't available a moment ago now is quite real.

Now, imagine yourself being the widow at the temple. Your two coins are almost worthless, but because they are all you have, their worth cannot be calculated. You have some reason to offer them, but the reason isn't because the temple needs money. Maybe giving them is a way for you to thank God for help received. Maybe you're giving them as part of asking God for help you need. Whatever the reason, you wait your turn, and watch, as Jesus watched, people of means make a big deal of their large donations. Now you are standing at the box. You look at your coins, and consider dropping in only one of the coins, and hanging on to the other one. But then, to yourself, you say, O, what the heck? And both coins leave your hand, jangling into the box. Right then, faith happens! Faith that wasn't there a moment ago now is real. Your heart is light, and you leave the temple more assured of God's goodness and mercy.

Be sure of this: Our giving is for our sake, for the sake of our faith. Cautious giving neither requires nor awakens faith. It's only when the giving is dangerous that faith gets involved. Dangerous giving is not for the sake of the prophet, or the temple, or the church. Dangerous giving is for the sake of our faith.

Each of us comes here on Sunday mornings for our own reasons. Each of us is involved in this church's fellowship and ministries for our own reasons. I submit that underneath the reasons we can think of – things like belonging to a caring community, like participating in things that give purpose and meaning to our lives, there is this foundational reason: we come here to deepen and strengthen our faith. We know in our bones that we need a healthy, resilient faith to rightly find our way in the ever more confusing and troubling world we're living in. God knows there's only one way for any of us to have that depth of faith, and that is, to take a risk which calls for faith. That's what happens when we give dangerously – our faith, like the faith of the two widows, is evoked when we take some sort of a risk. God is ready, willing, and able to give us the faith our soul knows we need. All we need to do is do the dangerous thing that can't be done apart from faith. It is right then that we get to see what the Lord can do.