

"The Widow Of Zarephath"

1 Kings 17:8-24

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Last Sunday, we dwelled beside the brook Cherith with the prophet Elijah to understand his loneliness and humiliation there. We saw how in the midst of a killer drought, he is sustained by a shrinking stream of filthy, polluted water- just enough for him to drink and clean himself with, and by ravens who brought him scraps of rotten waste and bits of flesh from the remains of decaying animals. But more important than a place to be kept alive, it became for him a "school of obedience"- a place where great mental, emotional and spiritual development could take place. In the fierce furnace of affliction, his faith was being refined, his powerful personality disciplined. Only after his testings would he be obedient enough to go anywhere and perform anything God asked of him.

Here in our text, God has ordered Elijah to finally leave the Brook Cherith and go to Zarephath--a town not even in Israel but in Sidon, a country formerly known as Phoenicia. Thus the next part of his instruction is going to take place only eight miles from what had been the home of his greatest enemy- Jezebel, the heathen Queen of Israel and wife of King Ahab. God thus sends his prophet into enemy territory to encounter a widow there, a Gentile woman SO poor that she had barely enough resources to provide for both herself and her young son.

As he approaches the gate of the city, he sees the widow gathering up sticks for a fire and asks that she might provide him with food and drink, the last vestiges of food in her larder. You have to admit that it takes some chutzpah to command a despairing widow, who along with her son is now on the verge of starvation, to sacrifice their final meal for someone who appears to be nothing other than a rude and crude beggar. And yet, what's MOST AMAZING about the story is that she DOES it.

Back in the late 1970's, when I was working for an insulation company in California, my work partner Jim (who I'd also graduated from Bible college with) and I were sent out to insulate a new home which was way out in the middle of nowhere- and I mean NOWHERE. It wasn't until we got there that we realized we were SO far out in the boonies that when lunchtime came, we would probably have to drive a good 10-15 minutes in any direction before we'd finally find a grocery store or restaurant to eat at. When noon came, I put my tools down, yelled to Jim that it was time to break for lunch, and headed for the truck. That was when Jim said to me, "Wait, Dave. I've got a BETTER idea." Half a block away was another home, the only other house in the area. Out in front was an older woman—presumably the owner—who was busy doing some gardening. Jim said, "Follow me." We walked over to the woman and Jim proceeded to tell her who we were and how we'd gotten stuck there for lunch without food or drink of any kind. He then asked her if she would be so kind to as to bring us both a sandwich along with a couple of cans of soda if she had any. Well I was flabbergasted that Jim would go up to a complete stranger and make such a brazen request as that. But the woman got up from off her knees and said, "You know, it would be my pleasure. I'll be right back with some food for you guys." She

disappeared into the house and returned five minutes later with two large sandwiches, several bags of chips, and a couple of cans of Coke. "I hope you like ham," she said, "That's all I have. And if there's anything else I can get you, just let me know. You two can sit on my porch and eat in the shade if you'd like"

We ate our lunch and after thanking her for her generosity and kindness, we headed back up the street to finish our job. As we walked, I said to Jim somewhat embarrassed by the position he had put us both in, "Where do you get the gall to go up to a complete stranger and impose upon her like that." I've never forgotten his reply. Jim, who knew something about human nature, said, "Dave, you've got to understand. She wasn't offended in the LEAST. Rather, it gave her a sense of being wanted and that's one of the most important feelings anyone can have. People love to feel needed and appreciated and we gave her that opportunity. We just did ministry back there AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE IT."

I can't say whether the widow in our text felt particularly appreciated by Elijah's request, especially as it quite possibly represented the final meal for both herself and her son, but the fact that she did as he asked only makes her act of generosity and kindness all the MORE remarkable. Yet, if anyone ever needed renewed faith and hope, it was this despairing and destitute widow. Her husband was dead and she had barely enough food to care for her BOY, much less HERSELF. Her dwindling stockpile of food and money had pointed to the day when all would be gone, and after that, there was nothing more to do than DIE. It is at this point when Elijah arrived at her doorstep. From then on, the fate of these two individuals was inextricably entwined for not only did their food never run out but Elijah would later be the one to restore her son to life and present him back to his mother once again.

The fact of the matter is that Elijah needed this woman as much as this woman needed him. Elijah has often been called the "loneliest man in the Old Testament." Unlike many of the great figures of the Bible, Elijah always appears alone. He never has the support of a wife, of family, of friends, or even associates except when he encounters Elisha at the end of his ministry. But now he needed a friend, someone with whom he could share his own life with as well as his needs and frustrations, and that would be with a lonely, despairing widow who was just about ready to give up on life and die.

Likewise, the widow desperately needed Elijah to once more feel wanted, needed, useful. It enabled her to take her mind off her troubles and sufferings and focus her attention and energies somewhere else where she could be of help. When Karl Menninger, the late psychiatrist, was asked what someone should do who feels on the verge of a nervous breakdown, his advice was, "Lock your house, go across the railroad tracks, and find someone in need and do something for him." In Elijah, she found someone to care for, someone she could also share her sufferings with. For three years, a very special relationship was forged between these two very different individuals that ended up enriching BOTH their lives.

As I meditated upon our text throughout the week, I thought of a similar relationship in my OWN life that closely parallels the one between Elijah and this widow of Zarephath. In 1974, while attending college in Santa Cruz, California, I supported myself by performing a lot of odd jobs for people such as gardening and buying groceries for shut-ins. One of the first

persons I worked for was Earl and Lucille Cushing who lived way up in the mountains of Zayante, just outside of Santa Cruz. They were both in their late 70's and had never had any children. In fact, Lucille was known throughout the area as the "Cat Woman of Zayante" because of the proliferating number of cats she cared for.

Earl was an immigration lawyer who worked in San Francisco for many years until they both retired to their mountain cabin in the early 1950's. I could see his health was not too good. I remember how, against doctor's orders, he used to hold a large cigar between the knuckles on his hands which were horribly swollen by rheumatoid arthritis. He lived in intense pain most of the time and hardly ever came out of the bedroom. Lucille, on the other hand--a small woman of Irish extraction--remained his dutiful wife, serving him and looking after the house.

For the first year or so, I would show up each week to garden and maintain the upkeep around their property. But then in 1975, Earl died and I found my duties expanding, becoming more of a caretaker around the place. Each week, I would pick up groceries for Lucille. I built a complete set of stairs and a cement walkway to help her get around better. I also continued to garden and maintain the general appearance of her home. Even after I graduated from college and went to work for a few years in the construction trade, I continued to show up in the evenings and look after her. I almost never accepted any money from her but when I did, it was usually just to cover my gas.

Over the years, Lucille and I became very close friends. We spent many hours together sharing stories of our lives and the interesting people that were a part of it. I heard all about her growing up in Salt Lake City, her years as a secretary in Washington, D.C. where she eventually met Earl, and of the years she and Earl lived in Hawaii and San Francisco. I spent most every Christmas Eve with her so she wouldn't have to be alone and would surprise her with a cake each year for her birthday. During those years, I lived some three thousand miles away from my immediate family and thus had minimal contact with them. Therefore Lucille became a kind of surrogate grandmother to me while I became like a son to her. She would often refer to me as "my David" and tell people that I was the son she never had.

One day, I went to visit her and found her collapsed on the kitchen floor. She had fallen the day before and couldn't get up, having remained there throughout the night. At one point, she became so thirsty that she was forced to drink the milk she had put out for the cat. I called the emergency squad who immediately came for her. After a few weeks in the hospital and a month in a nursing home, she was finally able to return home. However, I could see that her health had deteriorated tremendously and I knew it was only a matter of time before she would have to enter a nursing home for good. After my graduation from seminary, I moved back East to become the pastor of a congregation in northwestern Pennsylvania. My contact with her was thus limited to our infrequent phone conversations. Then one day, I received a call from a mutual friend informing me that Lucille had become too infirm to remain at home, that she had to be taken to a nursing home to live.

In March of 1986, I returned to California to be ordained in my home church. While I was out there, I paid a surprise visit to my dear friend, Lucille. She was sleeping when I walked into her room. Gently calling her name, she opened her eyes which became wider and wider

with stunned amazement. Then, with tears streaming down her face, she exclaimed, "Oh David, David, I always knew you'd come back!" I'll never forget how she took my hands between her own and gently kissed them. We visited together for several happy hours and as I prepared to take my leave, we joined together in prayer. I told her that I would continue to keep in touch though I knew it would probably be the last time I would ever see her. A month later, I received a phone call informing me that Lucille had finally passed on.

Whenever I think back to those years, Lucille will always be a central part. The odd thing is that we never drove in the car together or attended church together or ever ate out together. All we ever did over the years was sit and talk- either at her home or in the hospital. Yet, as I've come to discover, some of our most effective ministry is not in DOING anything but rather in simply BEING PRESENT to someone- in just BEING THERE to LISTEN and to ACCEPT that person AND NOTHING ELSE. There is a real ministry of PRESENCE that is sorely needed in the pastorate and in the church, a ministry that involves nothing more than just caring through LISTENING and ACCEPTING for by doing so we help carry a small portion of that person's burden. This is ESPECIALLY true of the elderly, of the bereaved, and of the terminally ill. Something so simple, so inexpensive as being present to someone and listening with an open heart can be the greatest gift we can ever give someone.

The ranks of the widowed are increased by 800,000 every year with studies showing that they lose 75% of their friendship network once their spouse is gone. In the first month of widowhood, one third of them meet the criteria for clinical depression and half remain clinically depressed a year later. 60% of them experience serious health issues in that first year and their situation is only made worse by the financial decline most experience as well. There is a tremendous amount of ministry to be done among those who are depressed and lonely and afraid but by simply bringing your presence and being a support person to them, you will find yourself actually DOING MINISTRY and never even realize it.

Thus we see that the poor widow of Zarephath was not so poor AFTER ALL, that out of the abundance of her heart, she gave Elijah more than Ahab with all his riches could ever have offered- the gift of friendship, the gift of hope, the gift of love; a gift ever so priceless, yet ever in such demand in our age. It was the same gift given to me by Lucille Cushing and I to her; a treasure that shall endure when all my other treasures have turned to dust; a gift we can learn to give to each other that remains a part of our thoughts, our memories, even our heart. After all, this is what it means to be HUMAN- to live in relationship with one another, sharing our thoughts and feelings, bearing one another's burdens and concerns.

And it is Christ himself who provides for us both the MODEL and INSPIRATION for this principle. By making our heart his home, we are now assured that we are NEVER ALONE in the face of whatever challenges life may throw our way. What he instructed his disciples at the conclusion of his "Great Commission," he no less says to US, "Surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Thus, Jesus's FINAL words to his followers become his FIRST words to you and to me this morning- his promise to abide with us BOTH NOW AND FOREVERMORE in a bond that can never be FRACTURED OR BROKEN. With his PRESENCE through his Holy Spirit at our side and in our heart, we find we are AIDED in every

trial, STRENGTHENED for every challenge, and COMFORTED amidst any and all adversity. As a result, NONE OF US ever has to feel forgotten, rejected or alone. Neither you nor I will ever have to go through life wondering if there is ANYONE who loves me, ANYONE who understands me, ANYONE there to lend me support when I need someone MOST because Jesus, with his OWN “ministry of presence,” will ALWAYS be near- both WITH US and FOR US. Thus, we are MORE than equipped to walk through this life humbly, confidently, expectantly and full of faith.

Friends, it is a fact that there is much loneliness and solitude ALL around us, ESPECIALLY DURING THIS PERIOD OF PANDEMIC where a large segment of our society and social life remains constrained. As a result, many of our older citizens find themselves home alone for extended periods of time with nothing but a book or the television set to occupy their time with. They have increasing needs such as for home supplies, food, and medicine but due to restrictions, their means for SECURING such things have become all the more difficult. This morning, I want to challenge you to think of someone YOU can share the gift of YOURSELF with and in return, you will discover in that other person--as Elijah did in his relationship with that poor widow and as I would learn through my friendship with Lucille Cushing--one of the greatest gifts ANY of us can possibly receive. Amen and amen.