

“Sharing”

1 Kings 17:8-24

Sunday, June 6, 2010—Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Rev. Judy Landt, Vernon Presbyterian Church

In this morning’s reading, we find ourselves in the ninth century BCE. King Ahab, one of the worst kings in all of Israelite history, is on the throne in the Northern Kingdom—the part of present-day Israel north of Jerusalem. God has appointed the prophet Elijah to warn the king and his subjects about the disasters to come if they don’t change their corrupt and self-centered ways.

There is a terrible drought. Everywhere the soil is dry and cracked. Plants have withered and died; people have neither food to eat nor water to drink. As the story begins, you can imagine the buzzards circling overhead and the smell of death is in the air. God tells Elijah to go to the city of Zarephath; a widow there will feed him, God says. So he goes. He finds the woman in desperate shape. Remember, widows in the ancient world generally lived on the edge of survival, even in the best of times. This one has a young son. All she has is a little oil and a little jar of meal, just enough, it seems, to bake a last little meal for her and the boy, which she’s getting ready to do. When that’s gone, there will be nothing left. She, and her son will starve. Death for both of them seems inevitable.

Into this sad scene steps Elijah. He makes what can only be called a thoroughly outrageous, if not downright offensive request, given the circumstances. He asks the widow to share her meager last meal with him. In the ancient near east, hospitality to strangers and guests was a deeply ingrained cultural value; Elijah surely knew his request would be difficult to turn down, but that only makes it seem more offensive. Please, he says, you don’t know me, but I’m asking you to share what looks like the last meal of your life with me. If you do, I promise God will make more out of it. I promise there will be enough to last for all of us until the drought ends. I suspect that, had the widow not been desperately weak from lack of food and heartbroken at being unable to provide for her son, she might have had a few more choice words for Elijah.

Some commentators like to portray this widow as a model of great faith, someone who trusted the word of God under the most extreme conditions and was rewarded accordingly. Given what happens in the next scene, I think a more likely explanation is that the poor woman was just so depleted physically and emotionally that nothing much mattered to her. She had given up. When your death and your child’s death seem imminent, when you know you’re about to swallow your last bite of food and it’s nowhere near enough to fill your stomach, how much difference does it really make if you get two last bites rather than three?

But as it turns out, it does make a difference. As she shares with the prophet, her little jar of meal and jug of oil miraculously provide enough to feed them all. But if she thought her generous hospitality merited some additional reward, she was soon to be disappointed. Her son becomes critically ill. Fortified with a few good meals, she now has the strength to give Elijah a piece of her mind. You came here and I shared the last

of what I had with you! And this is how you repay me, by bringing God's vengeance on me and causing my son's death? What kind of man are you, anyway? What kind of God do you serve?

Once again, the outrageous Elijah prays proves as good as his word, or perhaps we should say, God's word. He prays for the child, and the little boy's health and life are restored. God again brings life from death.

A lot of folks read this story as being all about us and our faith. They hear the message as something like this: Have enough faith, like that good widow, say the right prayers, some good prophet will show up and do a miracle for you. If you're not getting what you want, there must be something you're not doing right. Not enough faith, not enough obedience, not enough self-sacrifice, wrong words in your prayers, any of those things could be the reason. Fix what you're doing wrong and for sure you'll get what you're looking for, whether it's the right job, the right man or woman, or the right results on that biopsy.

Of course, we all can think of plenty of occasions when prayers just didn't seem to get answered, at least not in the way or on the timetable we hoped for. We know how often we've said prayers for the sick, for the hungry, for the injured, and yet Elijah failed to show up. We all know miracles don't just happen because we desperately want them. I hope you also know that when miracles don't happen, it's not because there's something wrong with us or with the way we prayed.

The widow's story is about God. But God is not some sort of magic slot machine, who promises to faithfully deliver the jackpot if we can just insert the winning number. That god is not God at all, it's an idol of our creation, born of our desire for simple solutions and happily ever after endings. God has never promised to be that god for us. God has never said that our faith is the secret to a trouble free life. We know it isn't, anyway, because none of us here has that kind of life.

But the widow's story does tell us some important things about who God really is and how God really works. It says that when we're at the end of our rope, when it feels like our cupboard has nothing in it, when we are starting to see the buzzards circling and smell the scent of death and despair, God is there. God is there, not necessarily to reverse our circumstances, but to provide the resources to cope with our circumstances. Because God refuses to let death and sickness and dysfunction have the last word.

The widow of Zarephath was out of food and out of hope. Elijah, God's messenger of hope, says: give to someone else out of what you have. I know it looks to you like there isn't enough, but if you give away some of what you have God will make more of it, and there will be enough, not only for you and your beloved son but for others as well.

Give some away, God will make more of it. So much of the Christian faith rests on that paradox. Remember how Jesus managed to feed thousands with a few loaves and fish. When we hoard what we have for ourselves, we will always feel in need. We will never

feel like we have enough. When we share of ourselves and our resources, even when it feels like we don't have much to give away, we find God always makes more.

In his book "Rediscovering Values", Jim Wallis, a bestselling author and Christian social commentator, talks about the current Great Recession and how we got to where we are. The recession is not just the creation of Wall Street with its big banks and subprime mortgages, Wallis argues; we need to see it also as the result of a spiritual and moral crisis in values in this country. And he suggests that the question we should be asking today is not, when will it be over, but rather, what can we learn from it?

Wallis urges us to take a hard look at our culture of consumption, our habits of spending money we don't have for things we don't need. He asks us to take a hard look at attitudes that tell us greed is good, that life is all about me and getting what I want and getting it now. He asks us to re-examine our cultural love affair with the notion that the next new product, outfit, vacation or car is what it will take to finally make us happy. These attitudes have all played a part in bringing about the current economic mess.

Wallis points out that historically, many of the world's economic crises have been preceded by great gaps in wealth between the richest and poorest, gaps that are widening both in this country and globally. In 2007, about a billion people in the world were subsisting on less than one dollar a day. If you make \$50,000 a year here in the United States, you belong to an elite group of the top 1% of the world's richest people. It's time to recognize that our well-being is connected with our neighbor's. In God's economy, there is enough for all, if we share.

Maybe part of what it means to share is learning to live more simply, making an effort to distinguish between our wants and our true needs. Maybe it means being willing to ask ourselves, when we go to buy something: do I need it? Does this purchase contribute to my becoming the kind of person God calls me to be? Maybe it means thinking about how to be more green, conserving resources at home, on the road, at work, here in the church. Wallis' book contains a lot of practical ideas for those who are beginning to think about how to make these kinds of changes. He also has a website, www.rediscoveringvalues.com, with more resources.

Miracles in the Bible, like the one in this Elijah story, or the one in this morning's Gospel reading, are not something we control, not something God does on command, not something to which our faith entitles us. They are signs that point to the kind of world that God intends, a world where the blind see, the crippled walk, and people are as much concerned with the well being of their neighbors as they are with their own. Our calling as disciples of Jesus Christ is to be actively involved in working for this kind of world.

God works through Elijah the prophet to minister to the poverty-stricken widow and her son. God chooses the destitute, despairing widow, a desperate figure living on the fringes of society, to save Elijah's life. God sustains both through the other. This is the truth about human life: God is present and at work in the worst of times. And we all need each

other. Until we understand that our own well being is wrapped up with that of our neighbors across the street and our neighbors around the globe, we will not be whole.

Today we celebrate another sign of the coming kingdom, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. May the bread and the cup remind us: In God, there is always enough. And when we share, God will always make more.

Amen.