

# *Hospitality and Healing*

**I Kings 17:17-24      Luke 7:11-17**

**Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church  
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In a time of drought and hunger the word of God comes to Elijah that he is to go to Zarephath. All of Israel is suffering due to the drought. The drought does not respect political boundaries, and so Sidon, Israel's neighbor to the north, is suffering as well. Elijah has been surviving on food brought to him by ravens and by drinking water in a creek. But the creek runs dry, and now Elijah heeds God's direction to go to Zarephath in Sidon, modern-day Lebanon, and to seek the hospitality of a widow. He finds her at the gate to the town and asks her for a drink.

I am immediately reminded of Jesus, who left the comfort zone of Jewish territory to go through Samaria, and there asked for water from a woman who came to draw at the well. No, it was not a time of drought, but the ensuing conversation reminds us of Elijah in Zarephath. Jesus offers a taste of living water that will cause one to never thirst again.

Elijah asks for water, and then for a morsel of bread. The woman does not refuse, but she pauses to explain to him the reality of the situation. This is no routine errand on which she finds herself this day. She gathers wood to make a fire in order to prepare a last supper. She is a widow with a child, a little food, and no means for acquiring more, in the midst of drought, in the midst of a land full of hunger, in a world where there is no care offered for widows and orphans. The widow does not refuse Elijah's request, but she shares with him her plight, her fear, her grief that she will not be able to provide for her child. Still Elijah asks her to share, but with his request come these characteristic biblical words of assurance: "Do not be afraid... share your meager provisions, there will still be some for you and your child, and then you will find that God will not allow your jar of meal to become empty, or your jug of oil to fail until the day when the rains come and prosperity returns to the land."

Do you remember forward to that time when Jesus was teaching on a hill, in a lonely place? The crowd was large, and they also were hungry. The disciples suggested that Jesus send them away so that they might find something to eat. But Jesus said, no, you feed them. And then a child offered five loaves of bread and two fish. Jesus multiplied what was offered and more than 5000 people were fed. The miracle began with hospitality – that ancient, cross-cultural embedded value that first you share what you have with your guests, even if it seems that you must go without yourself.

In a time of drought and hunger Elijah heeds God's word and seeks out a widow in Zarephath. The world is out of sync. There is sin and suffering in the land. Elijah and the widow find each other. Elijah finds hospitality. The widow trusts the prophet's promise that they will be sustained. In a time of drought, hunger, sin and suffering, Elijah and the widow connect and experience the grace of God.

This week Sharon Bowman and I gathered with 75 persons at our United Methodist Camp Colby in the Angeles Crest Forest. Those who gathered drew strength from one another in the midst of struggle, pain and fear. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> year that persons

living with HIV and AIDS have gathered for the Strength for the Journey Retreat at Camp Colby. We experienced hospitality, abundance, love and healing. People came from places of isolation, feeling like they had only a little meal and some oil that would not last much longer, and then they would wait to die. Some persons came to Strength for the Journey for the first time, feeling just that way, and found a community that gave them the gift of hope. Each year we find each other at Colby Ranch again and discover that when we share what little we have in that jar we have been hoarding – a miracle happens! There is suddenly more love than we can measure.

Elijah, the widow and her son are sustained by the miracle. But then another tragedy befalls them. The widow's son becomes ill ... "so severe that there was no breath left in him." (I Kings 17:17)

The woman complains against Elijah. "What have you against me, O man of God?" (I Kings 17:18) They have been through this time of drought together, and shared the hope that they would be sustained. But now tragedy strikes, and this loss coming on the heels of a glimmer of hope seems cruel.

Elijah turns to God with his own complaint. "O Lord, my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying?" (I Kings 17:20) But still Elijah does not give up. He calls upon God, against whom was his complaint only a moment before. "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." (I Kings 17:21) How real this is. In our grief we lift up our complaint to God, and then in the next moment we turn to God for help. To whom else shall we go?

Elijah met a widow at the gate of Zarephath. Jesus meets a widow at the gate to the town of Nain. But this story has progressed more quickly. It is not a widow gathering wood that he meets at the gate, but a widow in a crowd of mourners in the midst of a funeral procession. Her only son has died. These people are in pain. A widow losing her only son was a vulnerable one becoming more vulnerable. There is a large crowd here, all of them aware of the tragedy that has befallen. When Jesus sees her, he has compassion for her. He says to her, "Do not weep." (Luke 7:13)

Why does Jesus say, "Do not weep"? Did he not himself weep at the tomb of Lazarus? Jesus' words to the widow of Nain echo Elijah's "Do not be afraid" assurance to the widow of Zarephath, and they also echo forward to the words he will speak to Mary in the garden on the day of resurrection. Jesus can speak these words because he knows completely the extent of her pain. Perhaps only Jesus knows. "*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus.*" Jesus knows completely the trouble this woman has seen, but he still says "Do not weep," because he sees still more.

At our Strength for the Journey campfire on Friday night, the last night of camp, the campers were given the opportunity to reflect on their experience. One person after another expressed amazement at the unconditional love experienced during the week. One woman observed, "Why is it that we have to go through so much pain and loss before we find a love like this?" I wonder. At a Strength for the Journey camp there is no pretending that everything is fine. There is no judgment condemning people for the disease they have. The pretense and the judgment happens just about everywhere else. But Christ is there to greet them when they come to Camp Colby, Jesus who knows the troubles they've seen, Jesus whose love is real, and Jesus who sees something else besides their troubles, and thus is able to say "Do not weep," not because weeping is bad

and not because there are not a million reasons to weep, but because just at this moment we are on the edge of something wonderful that is about to happen.

Elijah cries, "O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." God listens to Elijah, and the boy is revived. (I Kings 17:21-22)

Unasked, motivated by his compassion for the vulnerable widow made more vulnerable with the loss of her son, Jesus approaches the funeral procession, puts his hand on the bier carrying the body: "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sits up and begins to speak. Jesus gives him to his mother." ... "A great prophet has risen among us!" the people say. "God has looked favourably on his people!" (Luke 7:14-16)

When we share the little that we have, when we set aside pretense and accept one another as we are, when we joyfully share Christ's love in community, then healing comes. Then we glimpse what Jesus sees when, knowing full well the troubles we have, he says to us with kindness and assurance, "Do not weep" ... receive the gift of new life. Thanks be to God. Amen.