
Sermon – 25th Pentecost
I Kings 17:8-16 & Mark 12:38-44
November 11, 2018

“A Happy Meal”

Understanding the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is possible only if we understand the role of charity in the Old Testament. God tells the prophet Elijah to go to a certain widow’s house because he has commanded her to feed him – necessary because of a famine in Israel caused by a drought Elijah himself called for to punish Israel for the wickedness of their King Ahab. What’s clear is the woman doesn’t have much to live on herself –claiming she’s preparing her last meal. God’s decision to send Elijah to her is mystifying. If you want to keep your prophet alive – why pick on a widow with little to live on herself?

The widow is from the region of Sidon, which is not even in Israel. Pretty cheeky of God to command a non-Jew to help a prophet – but this is where the story gets most of its force and helps us understand giving in the Old Testament. In Numbers 18, God commanded Israel to give so that worship would happen. There were other OT laws pertaining to charity and caring for the poor – the forgiveness of debts and letting the poor “glean” the edges of fields at harvest time to supplement their meager existence.

But giving in the Old Testament is primarily understood as “first fruits.” The amount of those “first fruits” to be given was a tithe – or a tenth, and the purpose of that ritualized giving was to provide for worship in Israel by supporting the Levite tribe, landless descendants of Jacob who God put in charge of the worship life in Israel – they were the priests. God commanded the people to bring of the first of their harvest, and in turn the Levites gave a tithe or a tenth of what was brought to them to supply the temple – the rest they and their families could live on.

The purpose of worship in Israel was to remind people of God’s law – including those pertaining to caring for others, and how God had provided for them in the wilderness and brought them to the good, fertile land they now inhabited. Giving had a two-fold purpose – expression of gratitude and caring for the poor. Charity was intended to keep the word of God alive in Israel and thereby keep Israel “alive.” Fast forward a couple hundred years to Elijah – one of few remaining prophets in Israel. He’s about to die of hunger - unless someone provided for him. The widow was the very sort of person Ahab’s Israel had routinely forgotten. But if Elijah survived - if the word of God returned to them - there was hope for Israel.

There is a stunning array of words in the English language that denote giving – charity, alms stewardship, philanthropy, benevolence, donations, bequests, contributions, and in church circles - offerings. Giving is something we learn. I dare say one of the first things a parent will try to teach a child – after potty training that is – is how to share. Moreover giving arises from uniquely human traits of generosity and gratitude - that set us apart from the rest of creation. I know people say in the animal kingdom there is sharing too. Mother birds feeding their young, lions “sharing” a

zebra and all that, but I rather think that's more about instinctual survival than a conscious decision to give up one's advantage or a possession solely for the benefit of another.

And yet giving, as we understand it from the Bible, is also an obligation - sharing is something that we were created to do and God expects us to do. In Genesis 1:29 God says to Adam and Eve "*I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit in it. They will be yours for food.*" God provided Israel the land they inhabited not just so they could prosper, but that knowledge of God's giving nature would go out from them to the world. How could the keepers of this story of creation not be a people of gratitude and giving?

How convincing is God's word going to be to someone outside the faith if it has no effect on those who profess that faith? That was the challenge for Israel, and by the time of King Ahab God's word was not having much effect at all on Israel. So, God used someone from outside to witness to Israel what they created for and to be - people with a daring faith in God willing to live differently, that all God's creation might live. The widow lived on a promise - as Israel had been created to do. And the story tells us the promise was kept...the jar didn't run dry.

Nothing in this story indicates that God later made the widow rich - she got by and was likely a poor widow after the rains resumed. Nothing in the story Mark tells of a day Jesus watched a woman put two copper coins in the temple offering should suggest that later Jesus found her a merchant husband who swept her off to a seaside villa either. The widow's pennies probably didn't move the dial much on the temple budget - but her faith moved her Lord enough for this story to be remembered.

Gratitude separates us from the rest of creation - it's part of what makes us human, bearers of the image of God.

But giving is also something we learn, and the best way to learn something is to do that something. An old proverb says; "*tell me and I will forget, show me and I will remember, involve me and I will understand.*" God involves us in his work through our giving. Yes, the church worships, and prays, and teaches - but when the church gives it becomes the vessel of God who from the very beginning gave that the world might know his love. When we involve ourselves this way, we understand why we were created - to bear the creative and redeeming word of God to the world.

Today we celebrate what our giving has helped us do in this past year. It's a good and proper thing to do by the way. It reminds us that together we are so much more than we are by ourselves. Look over the summary provided you today. Next week we ask you to commit - again - so that it all continues - even grows. Pray about it please. Few things reflect faith as much as giving - because giving says we're heard a promise and believe it. We believe the jar will not run dry, we believe our contribution matters. I know a couple of ladies that will tell you it won't...and it does. AMEN