

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 8, 2015
Pentecost 24
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 17:8-16
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Our Old Testament lesson today finds two people literally at the “end of their ropes.”

The first is Elijah, the prophet of God. You may remember that God sent Elijah to King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, who had turned the children of Israel into Baal worshipers and who were leading the people down a wicked path of destruction.

God’s message to Ahab and Jezebel -- through Elijah -- was that because of their disobedience, it would not rain for three and one half years. The message was *not* received favorably, and Jezebel put out a contract on Elijah’s life. As a result, Elijah goes into hiding. He stays near the brook Cherith, where he has water and where God sends Ravens carrying bread to feed him.

But after such a long draught, even the brook Cherith begins to dry up. And Elijah is at the end of his rope. So God says, “I want you to travel to the little village of Zarephath. There is a widow there, and she will feed you.”

The irony in this is that Zarephath was a tiny suburban village outside of the city of Sidon, the capital of Phoenicia. Sidon just happened to be Jezebel's home town! God, in his wisdom, sends his prophet *geographically* into the very eye of the storm, a place more than any other where it would be known that he was wanted, dead or alive.

Elijah is at the end of his rope. And, as is often the case in life, it appears as though things are going to get worse before they get better. For he's on his way to Zarephath.

When he arrives, he finds another who is at the end of her rope -- a widow lady. The draught has devastated this part of the country as well, and this poor lady is out foraging for sticks to use in the preparation of the last meal for her and her son.

Elijah sees her, and asks her for a drink of water. Ancient Near Eastern custom stipulated that you never refused the request of a traveler for a drink of water, so this woman goes to honor the prophet's request.

But as she does, he also adds, "Oh, and by the way, can you bring me a little piece of bread also?"

Now ordinarily, women baked bread in the evenings, and in the morning there were always leftovers. But this lady is down to her last few drops of olive oil and her last little bit of flour. She has probably not eaten in a day or more, and has

probably been rationing food for days in order for her and her son to survive. She didn't bake any bread the night before, and so she doesn't have anything left to feed anybody. She is gathering sticks to build a fire on which she will bake a small loaf of bread for her and her son, a meal that will very likely be their last.

She is at the end of her rope. She tied a knot in the end some time ago, and has been hanging on. But that knot at the end of the rope is slowly slipping through her fingers.

What do you do when you find yourself at the end of your rope? What do you do when you've tied a knot and held on, but your strength is gone? What do you do when you've done all you know to do, and it seems as though it's not enough? What do you do when you've prayed for a miracle, but the only answer you hear is silence?

It's almost impossible for me to answer that question. I do know what this widow did, however.

Elijah offers her a tremendous challenge. A challenge which required great faith. He says to her: "Go ahead and prepare your last meal. But before you do, make me some bread first. Afterward, there will still be enough for you and your son."

Elijah's challenge to this widow is also a challenge to us. For when you get to the place where you barely have two nickels to rub together, if you can put God

first in that situation and honor God with what you have, then somehow in the mystery of God's grace, there will still be enough.

When you get to that place in your life where you have tied a knot in the end of your rope and to give any more will require you to let go -- if you can honor God in that situation and trust in him when your trust in him is all you have left -- then God will not let you perish.

When the things you've given your life for disintegrate into little pieces at your feet, and you literally don't know what comes next -- if, in the midst of that despair you can choose to honor God, God will honor you.

The text tells us that this widow woman accepted Elijah's challenge. She indeed did bake some bread for Elijah, and we are told that for several days her oil and flour were used up but not exhausted. There was always enough.

The widow woman in our Gospel lesson today exhibits similar faith and courage. Taking her place in line on the way to the collection plate in the temple, she is in the midst of scribes and others who were giving huge gifts and making gargantuan contributions. But as she approaches the collection box, she places the equivalent of about two pennies into the plate.

And Jesus calls the disciples over and says, "Since you are discussing the subject of greatness, take a look over there at that widow. What she has done is

truly great, not because of the *size* of her gift, but because there is nothing left over after she has given it.”

I’m becoming convinced that true stewardship is not so much about giving God *all* that you have (although it *is* His). **Stewardship is about giving God the *best of what you have and the best of who you are.*** It’s about a decision not to serve God leftovers.

Think back to the principle of the tithe in the Old Testament. The purpose of the tithe in the Old Testament was not just to be able to pay the light bill. The tithe was related closely to the notion of “first fruits” -- of bringing to God the *first* and the *best* of who the people were and what they had. It was a tangible way of putting God first in all things, a recognition that “all things come from Thee, and of Thine own have we given thee.”

Both the widow of Zarephath and the widow in the temple discovered that life often drives us to the place where all we have left is God. But they also discovered that when you get to the place in life where God is all you have, you often find that God is all you need.

These widows -- mighty in faith -- knew what each of us also learns in life, namely, that there are two kinds of people in the world. There are givers, and there are takers. These widows had made their choice. They were going to be givers, because the God they served was the God of abundant provision.

As we prepare to come to the table this morning, we face a similar decision in *our* lives. And the decision is simply this: ***What kind of people do we want to be?***

I invite you to come to this table today with great thanksgiving in your hearts. For at this place, there is always enough grace to meet your need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.