

October 4, 2020 World Communion Sunday

This passage is one of the most dramatic in all of Scripture, and it comes in two acts. The miraculous provision of food during famine, and the resurrection of the widow's only son. It is an important passage since we know that Jesus used it to illustrate his sermon in Luke. It is also a controversial and dangerous passage because after Jesus reflected on this passage in his sermon, the congregation, which was from his home town, tried to kill him.

It is also dramatic and beautiful. Every word rings with the power of the Hebrew story teller. Let's look at it. It is during the time of King Ahab about whom scripture comments that "he did more to provoke the Lord than all the Kings before him."

Elijah, whose name can mean "His God is Ywh, is a Tishbite who has settled in Gilead, is an outsider even in his own town. He has just been lying by a brook after declaring to Ahab, the corrupt King, that there would be a drought in the land, a time of political corruption and economic destitution. Elijah, who is hiding out near a small mountain brook, finally sees it dry up and he finds himself under the same curse that his people are under, hungry and thirsty. The word of the Lord comes to him. It is a strange word. God says, "Go to Zarephath, which means land of the fortress, or place, of the goldsmith. It had been a rich and powerful city before the famine. It is the land of Sidon, the home of Jezebel, Ahab's wife, the most notoriously wicked woman in all of scripture, and Elijah's sworn enemy. Then God says, "Don't just visit, but stay there, make this place your new residence, because I have instructed a woman, a widow, to provide for you.

Elijah, a manly man, is thinking that all I need is a woman who's a widow to look after me. The text indicates that she is destitute and forsaken which was a widow's plight, even in the best of times. The text indicates that she will sustain Elijah both with food and with a "fighting spirit". All of Israel and Zarephath had lost that "fighting spirit". Signs of it were everywhere. When Elijah came to Zarephath, the gate was wide open. You could almost see it swinging slowly back and forth in the unrelenting sun and you can hear its hinges creaking. This once proud fortress and center of a lucrative gold smithing trade was not even worth attacking anymore. No one even bothered to close to the door. I can visualize abandoned businesses lining deserted streets. The first thing that Elijah sees when he walks through that gate on one of those streets is a widow gathering sticks with the desperation and intensity of the hungry and hurting. He immediately says, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar?" Notice not a demitasse cup but a *jar*. He is pushing his luck. The woman goes to get it, and Elijah, pushing his luck even more says, "...and can you break off a piece of bread and bring it?". She answers with a different word for bread, saying the equivalent of, "What do you think, that I keep coffee cake ready for strangers? I've got nothing except a little flour and oil for one last meal for me and my son. We will eat this and then die."

Elijah says what almost every representative of heaven says in scripture; "Do not be afraid." "Do as you have said, except make a cake (using the word for fancy bread) for me, and make one for you and your son, *afterward*, that is at the end of the sentence to give it emphasis. Feed me first. Then Elijah says the unbelievable. "The flour will not be used up nor the oil run dry until the rain returns." She does it; surely a sign of a fighting and courageous spirit. I have seen this on a small scale. Our next door neighbor is a single mother with three children. Her youngest son, masked, came and asked if we had any cream of mushroom soup that they could borrow. I do not buy, stock, nor eat cream of mushroom soup. However, when I checked my shelves there was a can, and not just any can, but a nice Progresso. I

shop at Nob Hill electronically and they had substituted it for something else. God does provide. I have seen it over and over. In today's scripture, Act Two, consists of the death of the widow's son, who comes back to life after Elijah takes the dead child from her arms, sprints upstairs (no small feat) with the child and lays himself out, crying to God for healing, and the child lives. Surely a sign of the resurrection. A great passage, so why, when Jesus preaches on this, is it so controversial? Because Elijah, the leading prophet in Israel during a famine, provided food and healing for an outsider. Jesus said, "There were many Jewish widows in the time of Elijah but he was sent to one in Zarephath who is a Gentile". Then they tried to stone him.

During world communion Sunday we need to reflect that God provides the gifts of creation to everyone on earth, as it says in Acts, he provides rain for the just and the unjust. Christ who was crucified was raised by God for the benefit of the whole world.

As John's gospel says: "God sent his son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him. I have always believed in an open communion table because this piece of real estate does not belong to us. This is the table of the Lord, and he invites everyone in. But really, this table is just a sign that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. There is another dynamic, which Jesus does not mention. Elijah was not sent to help the woman, the woman was sent to help Elijah! When there is mutual sharing there is life.

We are facing some real challenges in the world, global warming, the pandemic, social unrest, and we are in this together. A tree cut down in Calcutta affects us. A death from Covid in Canada takes something from us. If only one person does not have access to health care we are all wounded. The importance of Black Lives Matter lies partially in the fact that if their lives don't matter no one's life matters. As Martin Luther King said, "No one is free until we are all free". There is an old joke that the Unitarians used to believe in the Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of man and the neighborhood of Boston, because so many of their churches were in that one town. Today Unitarian Universalists have a truly broad based accepting view. We need to be careful that we do not practice a tribalism in which those like us are the only people that count, people who share our outlooks, ancestry and prejudices. That is contrary to the universalism that Christ preached and lived.

As we come to the Lord's table, on this World Communion Sunday let us acknowledge that we are one family of God over all the world. At Rockville, my last church, we had a large feeding program in which volunteers cooked wonderful gourmet meals for the needy and homeless. I once asked one of our cooks what inspired her, and she answered, "I cook for these folks just as I would for my own children."

Here at Trinity we are an incredibly generous, mission oriented church. This is because we see others as part of our family. When my granddaughter graduated from college, the Deacons, who had never met her, sent her a nice financial gift. She wrote a wonderful thank you note back. When it was read at a Deacons meeting I felt truly part of the family of God here at Trinity.

As Paul says, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf." That is the miracle of love.