When Not Enough Is Enough

Third Sunday after Pentecost 2016

1 Kings 17:8-16 Luke 7:11-17

*The widow answered, “In the name of the living Lord your God, I swear that I don’t have any bread. All I have is a handful of flour and a little olive oil. . .After that, we will starve to death.”. . .Elijah said, . . .The Lord God of Israel has promised that your jar of flour won’t run out and your bottle of oil won’t dry up before he sends rain for the crops.”*

*1 Kings 17:12a, 14*

I am a victim of my own greediness! When I was called to my first church out of seminary, a small church on the west side of Kauai, I did so at my own peril. Having had to scrimp and save, trying to make ends meet while in school, I received a call to this small rural church. Although they paid a rather modest salary, they made up for it with frequent potluck suppers. They loved potlucks. Those feasts were the only occasions when I saw some of the men in church – for some obvious reasons. The church, composed primarily of workers from the sugar plantations in Kekaha and Makaweli, **splurged** on those potlucks. Those tables labored under the burden of holding all that fried chicken, poke, sushi, and other local favorites. I loved those suppers and, of course, overindulged. I could never say *enough already* and lamented after the fact, *Oh, I think I ate too much.* People say that if you eat slowly, your brain will catch up with your stomach and tell you when you have sufficiently fed yourself. My brain never had a chance to warn me that I had reached the limits of comfort and had had enough. Pretty soon, my 32-inch waist began its outward expansion. I have spent the rest of my life trying to undo it all.

When is enough enough? Moderation, that ancient virtue extolled by the Bible as well as other philosophers, is not in vogue these days. We see evidence of doing things to excess all around us. A couple of decades ago, Imelda Marcos was the poster girl for the excessive lifestyle of the rich and famous, with the thousands of pairs of designer shoes, and gallons of French perfume. While most of us do not reach those limits, I think our closets have more clothes than we can possibly use and we may have more bling than necessary. Whether it’s golf clubs, jewelry, autos, or whatever, we tend to excess.

Ironically, I think for many of us, we overindulge out of a sense of scarcity. Those who experienced the devastation of the financial collapse of the stock market in 1929 came out of the experience with a need to have more than they needed. So they kept a little extra in the bank account or safety deposit box, just in case.

What is enough? This is a question that we confront in the Bible story about Elijah and the widow of Zerephath. Let me freshen your memory of that, since we didn’t read that passage this morning. According to the writer of 1 Kings, Elijah the prophet, was a bane to the existence of the King of Israel at the time, Ahab, and his foreign-born Queen, Jezebel. Elijah continues his torment of the royal pair, this time by announcing a drought in the region as punishment for their infidelity to God. It comes to pass and Ahab and Jezebel are not happy campers. Elijah knows what’s good for him and hightails it out of town. God directs him to the remote village of Zarephath. Although the drought has affected this town as well, God instructs Elijah to seek out a certain widow who would take care of him. He does so only to find that the widow and her son are in dire straits and in no position to offer help. She laments: “I swear that I don’t have any bread. All I have is a handful of flour and a little olive oil. I’m on my way home now with these few sticks to cook what I have for my son and me. After that we will starve to death.” (17:12b) Get the picture? She is saying *You’re asking me to help you? I don’t have enough to help myself and my son. How do you expect me to help you?*

This lament is a precursor to the story in the Christian Bible of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Do you recall this familiar passage, one of the few to be found in all four gospels? In that story, Jesus was in the midst of a teaching gig and it got to be lunch time. The disciples encourage Jesus to give the crowds a lunch break, so they could feed themselves, go down to the nearest Burger King or Mickey-D’s. Jesus would have none of that. He ordered the disciples to feed them. Let’s be reasonable, they argued. All we have are a couple of fish and a few biscuits. Jesus tells them to bring those items to him. He blessed those morsels and commanded that they share those fish and biscuits with the crowd, about 5,000 in all. They knew better than to disobey, and so did as he instructed. As they did so, all were completely fed, to the extent that they had leftovers.

These two stories, Elijah and the widow and the feeding of the 5,000 both teach a theology of abundance as opposed to a theology of scarcity. Here’s what I mean. Let’s talk about a theology of scarcity, a belief system under which many Christians and others labor. A theology of scarcity is founded upon the belief that there is a limited amount of resources and therefore one should accumulate as much as one can. You don’t know when you’re going to need “it”, whatever “it” may be. All of us have experienced hoarders. Hoarding is such a common phenomenon today that at its extreme, it has been classified by psychologists as a neurosis. Hoarding is based on a theology of scarcity. Hoarders will tell you they will need everything that they are accumulating, even though there is no possibility that they will ever have use for those things in their lifetime.

The poster boy for hoarding in the Bible has no name, but Jesus talks about him as the rich fool. He is the one Jesus talked about in the parable who had a barn full of grain. Then he got more, so that he could not store anymore in his barn. His remedy? He built a bigger barn. Jesus ended the parable by calling him a fool. He would die and all he had accumulated would serve him naught.

Let me be clear: there is a sense of practicality to this point of view. The widow of Zerephath was being realistic. It was a period of famine. She was down to her last meal, as meager as it was. She was not hoarding, not being selfish in protest to Elijah’s request to feed him. Neither were the disciples in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. If you were being realistic, what good would a couple of fish and a few biscuits do in feeding a hungry crowd? A theology of scarcity.

Elijah consoled the widow: “Everything will be fine. Do what you said. Go home and fix something for you and your son. But first, please make a small piece of bread and bring it to me.” (1 Ki. 17:13) Jesus similarly tells the disciples to bring the fish and biscuits to him. Both the widow and the disciples did as asked. It took a leap of faith to move from a theology of scarcity to a theology of abundance. A theology of abundance can be summed up by this statement of faith that the apostle Paul proclaimed: “Our God is sufficient for all your needs.” A theology of abundance believes that there is truly enough for all. As we say in the communion service: “. . .sharing by all means scarcity for none.” In the end, the widow of Zerephath discovered the truth of that statement. In the end, the disciples and the 5,000 understood that. But they did not understand it before they risked following the counsel of the prophet or Jesus. Will we risk believing it as well? At the communion table, as we share this tiny morsel of bread and a brief sip of juice, we proclaim that we believe in the abundance of God’s goodness and grace. As we are filled by these tiny symbols, we declare God’s intention to feed all the world, made possible by God’s goodness and our willingness to share.

Today, I am challenging us all to live out the faith of Elijah and Jesus, to embrace and live out a theology of abundance. I am denying the voice of total practicality that says, I may need it someday. Is God really sufficient for all our need? Will your pledge today reflect a theology of the abundance of God? You have heard the pleas and challenges of our leaders. The church we love is in a day of deep challenge financially. Yet I believe they are looking to the challenges of our day with a theology of abundance, of believing if we follow the call of God, God will provide. Will you do the same in your life? I pray it will be so.