

“Mixing It Up”

1 Kings 17:8-16

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At first glance, our story from First Kings seems like such a nice little tale of God’s miraculous provision for a poor widow and her son threatened by a drought and famine brought on by the wicked powers that be. Big, bad King Ahab of Israel has married a foreigner, that Jezebel, and turned his back on God’s ways, and not only that, but we learn that “Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than had all the kings of Israel who were before him,” and those other kings had done some pretty sacriligious stuff. Now, with an intro like that to a King’s reign, this being the book of the Kings and all, you know the stage is set for a confrontation, and Elijah is just the man to give it to him, his first act being to declare that a drought would come upon the land, presumeably as punishment for Ahab’s misdeeds. The story seems designed to show us that God has empowered Elijah to be God’s earthly representative, the words from Elijah’s lips coming true as if they came directly from God’s mouth.

And so people are starving all over the place, even in far flung places like Sidon, to which Elijah is ironically sent to escape King Ahab’s fury, ironically because Sidon is the home of the wicked Queen Jezebel. And in our story tonight we meet a woman whose despair has peaked just as her food supply has bottomed out, a woman collecting what sticks she could find to make the fire that would

prepare the last meal she and her son would eat. There is one last measure of flour in the jar, and just a few more drops of oil in the jug. Like Hagar before her, she would sit beneath a tree and wait for death to take her. And then along comes Elijah to save the day, bringing the word which will replenish each day jar and jug and the poor woman is spared the awful death which awaited her, and which awaits thousands every day in our own time. Praise God for God's providence!

If only that were the point of the story! In fact, reading the story at a little deeper level actually reveals a rather indifferent God and a rather unpleasant prophet. If you read this passage without an eye perpetually predisposed to see God as always benevolent and ever loving, this is a pretty harsh passage, foreshadowing appropriately, the harsh treatment of some of the prophets of Baal, the primary deity competing with Yahweh during Elijah's tenure as prophet. A few stories later, we will read about Elijah mocking those prophets and their so-called god, and then rounding them up and butchering them after Baal fails to perform as advertised. Elijah is not really a very nice man, not a sympathetic character. He is all business, God's business, the kind of guy you need to deal with the King Ahabs of the world. Indeed, in the very next story, even though Elijah pleads with God to spare the life of this same widow's son, it seems only to be for the sake of God's reputation, and the prophet's own food supply, rather than the welfare of the poor widow and her dead son.

At the risk of being a real worship downer, let us count the ways in which God's indifference and the prophet's unpleasantness toward the widow are revealed. First, even though the Law of Moses was chock full of laws advocating the welfare of widows and orphans, apparently those laws only applied to the widows and orphans of Israel, to whom the widow of Zaraphath most definitely did not belong. She was from the nation of Sidon, a regular enemy of God's chosen people, the birthplace of Jezebel, and a center of the worship of Baal, the principal sin of King Ahab. Widow, schmidow. She gets no breaks here. God commands her to provide for Elijah, not the other way around. And even though the law of Moses has legislation requiring care for foreigners, that only applied to foreigners living in Israel, not those in their own territory. Elijah is camped out behind enemy lines. He is the foreigner, not her. No breaks here either.

On top of these more legal aspects, God comes off as just plain mean-spirited when asking a starving widow to provide food for a complete stranger, and a foreign stranger at that. The beneficiary of God's indifference, Elijah, doesn't even let her finish one task before he barks out another: hardly does she set out to fetch water, than he adds an order for bread! And this from a woman likely about to fall down from malnutrition, the tangible effects of a Yahweh-induced drought and famine. Apparently, compassion stops at the border. We might imagine not just her disbelief at the prophecy that "the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth," but her

contempt for the audacity of what must have sounded like a sucker's bet. "You run along now and make me a cake, with what you were going to feed yourself, and the Lord will provide," Elijah says. Yeah, right. He'll get his food and I'll die on an empty stomach after all. Trust me, he says...yeah, like a used car salesman. But we may suppose that since she had resigned herself to die anyway, she might have figured there was no reason not to do as he asked, or that she did it out of fear, preferring to die peacefully, if on an empty stomach, than to be beaten or killed for disobeying a man. She has not been put in a pretty position by Elijah or his God.

What I want you to see is that there is really only one reason the widow is even in the story, namely that the prophet needs to survive to fight the god of her people, a god who is competing for the affections of the people of Israel. The bottomless jar and jug are provided not so that she and her son may survive, but so that Elijah can survive. Remember that God tells Elijah that he is to live in Zarephath, not just spend the night. He's to make that place his base of operations for the duration and he'll need to be fed. More even than that, the survival of God's people is at stake, so far have they strayed from the ways God had commanded them. Elijah is the means God will use to re-educate them, but for that to happen, Elijah must be fed, and so God employs this already burdened, gentile woman to be Elijah's servant. This is not a story of God's providence for just anyone or everyone, but for God's chosen people.

Now, we often talk about God using people, and we usually mean by that that God employs our gifts and talents for God's purposes, in a partnership sort of way. God bestows, but asks something in return. But I don't think that is what is happening here. Here, it seems like God and Elijah are simply using the widow of Zarephath like a dirty dishrag. True, she is the beneficiary of the provision for Elijah, but she is really just a means to an end, She is, after all, the enemy, at least to the Old Testament mind, maybe not an enemy warrior, but certainly an enemy sympathizer. The picture before us is not a flattering one with God choosing sides, ignoring suffering, and heaping indignity on top of that suffering. But this is one of those texts you can't fully appreciate with egalitarian-minded, justice-seeking, diversity-affirming twenty-first century Christian eyes. To those eyes, God looks like the bad guy, and Elijah like the hired gun.

There is a lot commendable about reflecting on God's providence, of God caring for the weak and defenseless, of God making a way out of no way, of trusting God's promises even in the face of physical evidence to the contrary. But there are other lessons to be learned from reflecting with an Old Testament perspective, from taking this passage at face value for its brutality. You see, even though this doesn't sound like the God of Jesus, or Jesus himself, in an Old Testament kind of way it actually is, because the God who did not spare the feelings of a Sidonian widow is the same God who did not spare the feelings of his own son, but who used Jesus Christ to pursue us, no matter how far off we had

strayed. God is committed to Israel and will let nothing stand in the way of that relationship, certainly not a Baal-worshipping widow. What we see in God's indifference and Elijah's unpleasantness is, ironically, love; a fierce love, a pursuing love, a jealous love, a covenant love. This is a she-bear defending her cubs, a mother hen protecting her chicks under wing. This is God seeing through on the commitments God has made, and fighting for the chosen beloved. Believe me, this is the God we want by our sides when the times are tough, the God who spares no expense for us when we are surrounded by enemies. Sure, it doesn't square with our well-intentioned values of fair play and courtesy and self-sacrifice, but when the chips are down, would you really want a punchless God who will leave you twisting in the wind or one who will take no prisoners?

There is, of course, an evil twin to the doctrine of a fiercely protective, take no prisoners God, a twin named triumphalism, a twin which has led Christians through the ages to kill and maim in the name of the God revealed to them in passages such as the one from 1 Kings. If God chooses sides, the logic goes, so can I, and if God can use and abuse people and kill to protect God's interests, so can I. Where the logic fails, and thus where a worthy kind of love turns into mere violence and hate is where God's interests get confused with our interests, when the victories we desire get projected onto God's character, and once seen in the divine face, become justifiable at any cost. While the Crusades of the Middle Ages

are perhaps the best known example, there are countless other cases of the confusion of the divine and human minds. May God protect us from that evil twin.

The virtue of a passage like today's from 1 Kings is that it is a good reminder that although it is good to have God on your side, maybe even very good, it is still better if you are on God's side. For let us not forget the whole reason for the drought, the prophet, the widow, even the bottomless jar and jug: that God's people had wandered away and God was not about to let them go without a fight. In the long books of First and Second Kings, there are only three of the kings of Judah and Israel who are described as doing right in God's eyes – Asa, Josiah, and Hezekiah —and all the rest, like Ahab, lost sight of the need to be on God's side, to follow the commandments, to have the same loyalty to their God that their God had to them, to bring to flower God's interests, rather than their own plans, as they led the people whom God had entrusted to them. If we are to prevent the suffering of innocent victims like the widow of Zarephath, even from the hands of God, it will be because we have sought after the right things like abundant life, and justice, and healthy relationships that are part of God's desire for the whole world, the right things the prophets like Amos, and Hosea campaigned for on God's behalf. It will be because we have demonstrated even to our so-called enemies the kind of fierce love that God demonstrated on the cross. May God help us to experience that fierce love and live it triumphantly, but without triumphalism. Amen.