

SERIES: Romans: The Life of Faith. The Power of Grace.

“Trusting God in Everything” – 1 Kings 17:8-16

Pastor Jon Haakana

The two Scriptures this morning contain the stories of two widows — one from the Old Testament and one from the New. Both were impoverished. Neither asked for anything. Both gave everything they had. Both exhibited incredible trust.

Let’s seek to understand these wonderful women so that we might be more like them. These are women who had an amazing ability to trust God. They did not do what they did because they had hidden reserves somewhere; they did what they did when they were down to their last scrap of bread. So here is the first point amazingly demonstrated in the lives of these two women: Trusting God results in the ability to give. Let’s look first at this unnamed widow of Zarephath. She is so poor that she does not even have a name in the story. It was the author’s way of saying she had no social standing whatever in her community. If you read the story in context you will discover that everyone in the region was suffering. There has been a famine for the last three years. And by the way, it came because of the prayer of Elijah. At this point, only the very wealthy have reserves of food and water. The thing you begin to wonder about as you read the story is why God did not send Elijah to one of the wealthy families in the region. Why this widow? Widows were always the first to run out of bread during a famine. Why ask her for the last scrap of food she has when she and her son are dying from starvation? Why send Elijah to a Gentile in Sidon (now Lebanon), and not a Jewish person who was a part of the people of promise? Why go to one who is supposed to be the enemy of Israel, and having Israel as her enemy? Elijah and the widow are strangers to each other and their nations are in conflict with each other. They worshiped different Gods. They must have eyed each other suspiciously when they first saw each other. I wonder if she knew Elijah and that it was his prayer which was the cause of the famine — a judgment brought about, not because of Sidon’s sin, but because Israel had turned to worship Baal, the storm god?

Elijah had been living down by the brook Kerith, and the ravens had been feeding him there, but the brook dried up because of the drought. In order to survive he had to seek another resource. As he enters the city gate, he sees a widow gathering a few sticks. He calls to her and asks for some water — the very thing that is in short supply throughout the land. But without a word she proceeds to get him some. She obviously is a person of compassion rather than judgment. She recognizes him as a man of God, but as she is on her way to get his water, he calls to her and says, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.” But she informs him that she is gathering sticks because she only has a little bit of flour and she was going to build a small fire to bake the last bit of bread for her and her son — then they would probably soon die of starvation. Elijah tells her that the Lord has promised that she will not run out of bread or oil until it begins to rain again, if she will only do what he has asked.

Amazingly, she takes him at his word. And when she does, she finds that her little, when blessed by God, goes a long way. It is a story that reminds us of Jesus multiplying the loaves — a story that aligns him with Elijah the prophet. And once the woman responds in trusting faith, we find the answer to many of our questions. God has chosen a poverty-stricken widow because the rich can get along on their own and she needs what only God can give. God chooses a desperately poor widow because the rich, trusting in their riches, may not share with Elijah, but a poor person will. God has chosen a poor Gentile widow who is near death because the politics and conflict of governments mean nothing to her now. She is at the place where she has nothing to lose and not much to give, but she chooses to give.

The poor are often that way. Tony Compolo tells a story about meeting a man on an inner city street. The man is extremely dirty, and possibly psychotic. He is one of those people you are just not sure about. Maybe he is dangerous. He offers Tony a drink of his coffee from a grimy cup held in his filthy hand. Compolo suspects that he will be asked for money for the coffee, and he certainly has no desire to taste the coffee, but he decides to accept the man's offer as an act of grace. Tony thanked the man for the coffee and offered him something, but he refused and said, "Naw, I don't want nothin'." It is a cold night and the coffee is just so good; I just wanted to share it with somebody. If you want to give me something, give me a hug." So Tony and a dirty homeless man stood hugging each other on a cold, dark winter night. It is that kind of experience where we often encounter God. Those with the least to offer are often the most willing to give and actually have the most to offer. Don't miss this important part of the story: Only those who trust can dare to give.

But the second point is: Trusting God results in gratitude. I think of the poor, nameless widow whom Jesus saw putting a couple of pennies in the temple offering. Was she putting it in because she was hoping to win the lottery, (As in, "If I give this to God, maybe he will send me a lot of money.>"). I don't think Jesus would have lifted her up as an example if that was the case. And since Jesus knew it was her last two cents, he surely knew her motive as well. More likely, she trusted God and gave out of the gratitude she felt in her heart. She was not only grateful for what had been, but what would be. Like her, when we respond to God with complete trust then we get his attention. Whenever we deal with God, there must always be a transaction of trust. Trusting God means I have freedom from fear and the ability to live life with gratitude. It means that I have a confidence about life which other people do not seem to have. It means that every day is a day of praise and thanksgiving. It means living with doxology. You simply cannot be thankful unless you can trust.

For that reason, I am concerned for a culture that thrives on the grotesque. My heart aches for those who live in skepticism, suspicion and with a cynical spirit. The rolled eyes and upturned lip of this culture, along with its exasperated sigh, make us a stranger to joy. We are the opposite of the woman in the temple. We have more than enough of everything and give nothing. We have more than enough and want to keep it all. Where there is no faith, there is no joy. Where there is no trust, there is no thankfulness. Where there is no thankfulness, there is no giving. Stingy spirits come

from a lack of trust and result in grudging and ungrateful lifestyles.

I think of the story of another woman — a not very nice woman. She has a very bad reputation, and she has earned it. But Jesus has shown her respect, and offered her forgiveness and new life. With tears and sobbing that seem to release all of her guilt and shame, she pours out her gratitude to Christ and washes his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair. The most the religious elite can do is sneer at what they considered a repulsive emotional display that bordered on being sensual. And Jesus said to them, “He who has been forgiven little loves little” Those who trust God receive a new confidence. They live life with thankfulness and joy — they have good reason.

The third point is: Trusting God results in the blessing of God. For the widow of Zeraphath, trusting God meant receiving the blessing and provision of God. Without trust there would have been no blessing. Without the blessing she would not have survived. She gave the last of her flour and oil, and found that she couldn't give it all, because she couldn't use it up. The flour jar could not be used up, and the oil would not stop flowing. There was not only enough for her and her son, but enough for others as well. Trusting people discover that the supply of God never runs out. There is not only enough for them, there is enough for others as well.

I love the story of Jesus multiplying the fish and loaves for the five thousand. Not only could the people not empty the baskets of bread and fish, there was bread and fish to spare. Everyone had their fill, and there were twelve baskets of bread and fish left over. It is no mistake that the number of baskets was twelve — one for each of the tribes of Israel. It reminded them of Moses feeding the children of Israel in the desert. Each morning they went out to gather the manna that God sent them. It was there, as the Israelites were given the manna, the bread of heaven, that the Bible says, “He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little”.

We are a blessed people because we have a God who loves to bless, but the only way to experience the blessing of his provision is to live in trust. It is interesting that in the story of the widow in the temple, we never know what happened with her. Jesus said that she gave, “out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on.” Since that was true, how did she live? Where did she get her next meal? Jesus did not tell her to go home and find unending flour and oil in her cupboard. What did she do? We don't know, but we are led to believe she continued to trust. I believe that those who give their last and little, receive the unending and abundant resources of God.

There is an interesting festival in the Old Testament called the Feast of Firstfruits. At the beginning of harvest, the first grain to become ripe was not to be eaten by the farmer, it was to be given to God. Offering your firstfruits was a sign of trust. By offering God the first of the crop, and not keeping it for yourself, you were saying that you trusted God for the rest of the harvest and you were offering a sacrifice of praise.