

Put Your Flour Where Your Faith Is

I know you know someone like this: the person who professes a hundred causes, but never seems to support any of them by their actions. Maybe they extol organic food and denounce the evils of the big meat companies, but you're pretty sure you saw them drive out of the Arby's parking lot last week. Or maybe they talk about how much littering bothers them, but you've never seen them go out of their way to pick up a piece of trash on the ground. Maybe they enthusiastically agree with a person who mentions a love of baseball, but balk at the chance to actually go to a Brewers game. Sometimes, you just want to challenge that person to their face (maybe you've done this) and say "come on now. You say you believe in keeping the earth clean, or you love baseball? Put your money where your mouth is. Prove it by your actions!"

Today, God calls you to something similar. In our Old Testament lesson this morning, God through Elijah called a widow—and us—to put our flour where our faith is, knowing that you will face challenging circumstances, but rejoicing because God has given you divine promises.

And if we're talking about challenging circumstances and divine promises, the prophet Elijah is a pretty good person to talk about.

Elijah did not have an easy job. He was a prophet of the true God, sent to a nation ruled by Ahab, literally the worst Israelite king ever. He and his pagan wife did their best to eradicate true religion by killing every real prophet they could find and setting up altars to the Canaanite storm god Baal all over the place. God saw all this idolatry and murder, so he sent Elijah to announce a drought on the land to teach his people about the futility of idol worship. The false god of rain would be no help against the power of the true God, and the LORD withheld rain from the land for over three years.

Elijah, after making this proclamation, promptly went into hiding at a place called Kerith, where there was a small stream. There, God commanded ravens to bring Elijah food every day, twice a day, and while the king sent scouts, messengers, and soldiers all over the land to find Elijah and force him to do something about this drought he had announced, Elijah lived safely in Kerith for the first part of the famine.

Then come the first words of our lesson for today: "some time later, the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land." Ok. That's not really what we'd expect. I mean, God had gone to the trouble of making ravens bring Elijah food! Couldn't he have made sure that the stream kept going for his prophet?

But God had something else in mind for Elijah. "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." Once again, this is unexpected. Elijah was safe—not very comfortable, maybe, living in the wilderness and getting his food entirely from birds, but safe! And now, with no rain in the land and all the king's men looking for him, Elijah is supposed to travel all the way to Zarephath? That's on the complete opposite side of Israel. In fact, it's not even in Israel. It's way up north, in Sidon. And do you know who else is from Sidon? The current evil queen. So God was sending Elijah away from his safe hiding spot to walk across the country to a place he'd never been before which also happened to be the homeland of his greatest enemy so that a widow, someone from one of the lowest classes of society, could take care of him.

But God had commanded it, so Elijah went. And he made it safely to the town of Zarephath, and look, there's a widow, picking up sticks by the gate of the city (God's got really good timing). So Elijah called to her and asked "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" This doesn't seem like a big deal to this woman. Without hesitation, she starts off to go grab some for him, but then he stops her with the one thing she did not want him to ask for: "And bring me, please, a piece of bread."

And at this point, the dam broke. "As surely as the Lord your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." Can you imagine how this woman must have been feeling? How she's been trying to hold it together for so long, to be strong and brave for her son, to think of something, anything, that could help them out. But there was nothing. She was out of options, out of food, out of hope. The only thing left for her was to cook a final meal—if you can call two lumps of warmed-up oil and flour a "meal" for two people—and wait for starvation. Challenging circumstances? It doesn't get much more challenging than that.

And now, the man of God has appeared, right in her hour of utmost need, right when she could use God's help the most... and instead he asked for more from her. Really, Elijah? Really, God?

Do you ever find yourself thinking along the same lines as this widow? I have. No, I've never come close to starving to death, but I've been in tough situations, and I bet you have, too. Maybe you're in one right now. Maybe you're really struggling right now, and although you might have had a tough time decoding the sermon theme, you probably realized by now that this is a stewardship sermon about giving to God. And if you're in that tough place right now you could be tempted to think "This doesn't really apply to me. God knows that I don't really have enough to give an offering to him, or not very much at least." Or if that situation doesn't ring true for you now, it has before. Or it will in the future. The truth is, we all face challenging situations in our lives that make it legitimately difficult to give God our money, our time, or our prayers. If it's not a financial situation, then it's an illness or accident, or one for a loved one. "God, I know you have important things to say, but I've got to focus on getting through this work thing, or this family thing, first. Then I'll come back and spend time in your Word." "God, I love you, but I've got to save my money to pay for the doctor's bills that are coming due later this month." "God, help me through this week first, and then we'll talk about what we can give you."

Those are legitimately difficult situations. It is understandable not to feel like you've got anything left to give sometimes. And am I honestly going to stand up here and tell you that even when you feel like that, even when there's no hope left for you, that even then, you should make sure your offerings are still coming in? Is God seriously telling you that?

Yes.

God is our creator. He has given us everything we've ever had, including our ability to make a living, including our very lives. Nothing is really ours; everything is simply a gift from God. So if God wants some or even all of it back, who are we to argue? And on top of that, the Apostle Paul, in our epistle lesson for today, calls the act of giving a "grace" and a "privilege" for those who give. God tells us that it's a blessing *for us* when we give to him and other people. It's right there in the text: the command, and the blessing.

And that should make it easy. If we know what the Bible says, and if we honestly believe it, then we should be giving monetary offerings as well as time and energy and whatever other resources we have, and we should be excited about it! So why don't we? There's only one real answer, and everything else is just covering it up: it's because we doubt.

If we really believed that God is the highest good, worthy of all of our praise and devotion, we wouldn't have a problem giving generously to him even when things are tight. If we truly wanted him to be number one in our lives, we wouldn't have trouble fitting time with him into our busy schedules even if it meant doing a little bit less of some other things. It's true that God wants us to live our lives in this world and be smart with our money and time, making decisions that benefit our family and those around us as well as ourselves. But we take that too far when we use it as a cover-up for our doubting, self-centered hearts and an excuse to not give back to our loving Creator or spend time in his Word. And honestly, who hasn't done that?

Just one person. Only Jesus. Jesus didn't have a self-centered, doubting heart like we do. He spent his entire life in perfect obedience to the commands of God, gave all of himself to God and the people around him, and he did it all in your place, because he loves you. Jesus, who as God had everything, gave it all up to be a poor man in first century Palestine who didn't even have a roof to call his own at night. And even from that poverty, he gave more. Jesus gave up his life so that you could be inheritors of the eternal riches of heaven, which no one can ever take from you. My friends, what is our money, our time, even our lives here, compared with that gift? Instead of spending eternity in the dark blaze of hell, you get to live in the blissful light of God's presence! So what if God asks for your dedication to him on earth? Give back to him to thank him for what he's already done for you! There's more than enough to repay you a thousand times in heaven!

The truth is, we can't see the heavenly riches right now very well. All we can see are the troubles that we have right now, and here in the visible world, it sometimes seems like God has forgotten us or doesn't really care what happens to us while we're here on earth. But there's one other thing we have, which we see in the second half of our reading today: just like that widow, we have God's divine promises. Just listen to what Elijah says to this woman next: "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.'"

Do you see it? God saw that this woman was hurting and in need of real help, but he didn't say "oh ok, well nevermind then." What God did was better: he gave this woman a promise that her faith could hang on to as she carried out his will in her life. That promise strengthened her and with God's help she did exactly as the prophet asked. There was no reason for her to think that there would be enough flour for all of them except that God had told her so. And if there's one thing that history has proven time and time again, it's that God doesn't lie. Every prophecy, every promise, all fulfilled. So we know the end of the story because we can read it off the page, but the widow knew the end because God told her: and sure enough, the oil and the flour did not run out the whole time Elijah was with this family.

God never leaves us with a bare command to do something. There's always a promise to make us strong. Now, we don't have promises quite as specific as the one God gave the widow of Zarephath. We haven't been given the assurance of a miracle every day for the next three years like she was. But neither was the widow in today's Gospel lesson, and that didn't stop her.

Remember that reading from earlier in the service? Jesus was in the temple courts watching all the rich people put large sums of money into the collection box, but the one he drew attention to was the poor widow who put in two pennies. The reason our Lord praised her was not because of the percentage of income that she gave to God. It certainly wasn't because of the value of the money she gave. It was because of her trust in God, trust that believed the same promises we have from him, like Malachi 3:10, where God tells his people to bring offerings to him and says "Test me in this, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." What a promise! He doesn't promise that it'll look exactly like you might expect, but God does promise that giving generously brings blessings to everybody. No matter what. Let promises like that one strengthen you and remind you that God does care about your life right now. He will bless you, even as you feel the pain and stress of this broken world.

The widow at the temple didn't know what was going to happen the day after she gave her offering. And I don't know what's going to happen to me or to you tomorrow. Maybe God will provide in a miraculous way like he did for Elijah and the widow at Zarephath. Maybe he will provide for us in the regular way, using normal systems of work and pay. Maybe something will happen like the river drying up at the beginning of the lesson that makes us want to question everything. The truth is, God always takes care of you, no matter what. So even in those challenging situations, rejoice in God's divine promises and put your flour where your faith is. Amen.