

Courageous Compassion

A Sermon offered by Carol J. Alexander, LM
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

1 Kings 17:8-24

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied; neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. She then said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed. He cried out to the Lord, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" Then stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, "O lord my God, let this child's life come into him again." The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, "See, your son is alive." So the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth."

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1 Kings 17.24b

Our story begins sometime before the events written in the scripture that was just read. This story begins in 1 Kings Chapter 16 with King Ahab. At this time in Jewish history, the country is split into north and south kingdoms—Israel and Judah. Ahab rules over Israel, the northern kingdom. As was a common practice for small countries, Ahab married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal, who was a ruler in Phoenicia – north of Israel. Ahab's father had arranged the marriage between King Ahab and Jezebel. Thus, there was an alliance between Israel and Phoenicia that would probably be beneficial to Israel.

As was usual in the ancient world, alliance with a country meant treating its gods with respect. So, when Ahab built an altar to Baal, the god of Phoenicia, he did so not only because Jezebel asked him to do so, but because it was a normal thing to do from a political point of view.

However, from Yahweh's point of view, as described in 1 Kings, this was not acceptable. Baal was the god of storms, rain, and fertility. Ahab built an altar to Baal and, along with his wife, Jezebel, worshipped Baal. According to scripture, "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." As a result, Elijah

was sent by God to Ahab and declared “there will be no more rain or dew.” And so a draught began in Israel.

At this point in time, Elijah was not exactly a popular fellow. He had caused havoc in the political arena by admonishing King Ahab for worshipping Baal. Elijah had caused the draught that was becoming very severe, so that nothing would grow. God sent Elijah away to safety to a wadi where there was water. I was not acquainted with the word 'wadi' and discovered it is a dry river bed that is sometimes filled with water when rains come. At this time the wadi held water; but after a while even the wadi dried up. Then Yahweh sent Elijah to a widow in Sidon—Sidon, the very place that Jezebel was from. On the surface, this move by God seems quite odd. Elijah was a great prophet, and yet God sends Elijah away to a foreign city for his personal safety and for food to eat. Why would he not be sent to a friendlier place, like another part of Israel or to the Southern Kingdom of Judah? Sidon was Baal country. But, Elijah follows God's command and goes to Sidon, where he might be just as unpopular as he was in Israel.

There is one peculiarity of scripture that I don't always understand—because scripture often does not expound on it. Elijah follows God's command and goes to Sidon—how did Elijah know God's command? Did Elijah hear God's voice? Next question: does God have a voice? Or did Elijah have a dream that said “go to Sidon!” Or did Elijah just have an overriding feeling that he needed to leave Israel NOW because things were getting a little too hot where he was. Sidon was far enough away that, perhaps, no one would follow him to retaliate for the draught!

Elijah is sent to a widow with a young son. She is a very poor widow with nothing to eat except a small portion of meal and a tiny bit of oil. She expects this will be the last meal for herself and her son because she has no means to obtain more food. Even so, she responds to Elijah's request and brings him water, the little bit of grain and the small jug of oil.

Her response to Elijah's request is something else of interest in this story. If I am as poor as this woman apparently was—and had only a tiny bit of grain and a little oil that I felt certain was the last food my son and I were going to have before we died of starvation—I'm not sure how I would have responded to the request of a strange man who asks to stay at my home. The energy of God must have been strongly felt for her to respond as she did.

She prepares cakes for Elijah, herself and her son. “Cakes,” in this instance, are not the sweet confections we have today. Rather, cake was probably flat bread made from grain and oil. Delicious, right? Perhaps not, but nourishing. And for many days these cakes are sufficient for them. The tiny bit of grain and smidgen of oil is sufficient for “many days.” This certainly is a statement of God's grace and power. The idea that God provides for our needs is a theme throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Second Testament.

Here Elijah is sent to a foreign place, and yet much good comes from his being there. In some sections of the New Testament (Mark and Luke) this story of Elijah and the poor widow is referenced. Likewise, other foreign women are referenced when a mother asks for compassion from Jesus for her child, even though she was one of the 'dogs' (that is, a Gentile). There are many stories of Elijah in the Hebrew scriptures. He is referred to often in the Second Testament; specifically, in Matthew 27:47, when Jesus was on the cross, the people made reference to Elijah and wondered whether Elijah would save Jesus from death.

Elijah was seen as a great prophet and a healer. And both of these are active in this First Testament story—they have sufficient food, from only a little grain and small jug of oil, and Elijah brings the widow's child back to life. Both of these events happen to show the power of God at work in the world. In this case, God's power is seen through the eyes of a widow and her son.

It is rather amazing that God works in the most unexpected of places with the most unlikely of people. Some of the best stories in the Bible, the ones that remind us of other really good stories in the Bible, seem to happen in those out-of-the-way, across-the-border places, with

people who are on the margins and are surprisingly important in the grand scheme of things after all. In this case, the woman was very likely a Baal worshipper. Yet, she listens to Elijah and has hope for her future. She is generous to Elijah, a stranger, and offers food and lodging. And after many days--when her son is brought back to life--she knew in her heart that Elijah is a prophet from the God of the Israelites.

God, through the prophet Elijah, provided sufficient food and brought her son back to life. Her hope for the future was affirmed. In this unexpected place, with this unlikely family, hope for the future prevailed.

It takes considerable courage and compassion for such events to have positive outcomes.

I remember a story that was written in Science of Mind magazine some years ago. A young girl, Julie, had a series of several epileptic seizures in school when she was about eleven years old. Three classmates began to bully her, teasing her and calling her names. The threats became so frequent and so severe that, at lunch time, she had to hide behind the cafeteria line in order to be safe from the bullying. Even though her parents tried hard to help her understand that she was not defined by her illness--and that she was a beloved child of God--still, the young girl felt only the pressure of the bullying. She slipped into a very deep depression. She refused to go to school. She refused to eat. She refused to associate or interact with anyone. She just wanted to die and often thought of suicide as an answer. The taunting continued.

When a classmate and her classmate's older sister, Susan and Ann, observed that Julie was not in school, they inquired why. Those who were doing the bullying joked about Julie and her illness. Susan and Ann were very disturbed about what had happened. They began to write notes to Julie, mentioning positive things that were happening in their lives and at school. They encouraged other classmates to do the same. After a while, they began to phone and stop at Julie's house for short visits. Some classmates told Julie that they, too, had been bullied in the past--and that they were finally able to ignore the taunts and name calling--and begin to feel positive about themselves again.

Julie began to heal. Others surrounded her with their positive stories and experiences. Julie finally came back from the brink of death and was restored to her family and friends who supported her.

It took great courage and compassion for Susan and Ann to be the first to come to Julie's aid and to share positive thoughts with her. It took tremendous courage for Julie to accept their help. Two girls' courage and compassion set Julie free--just as Elijah set free the widow and her son.

Sometimes, of course, there are bumps in the road; and, outcomes are not always positive. I am reminded of an elementary school chum to whom I was recently re-connected, after many months of searching on my part. She is one who has had a rough experience over the last few years. Her marriage ended in divorce, she lost her job, and the bank foreclosed on her home. Now she is ill with a lingering, progressive disability that, while not immediately life threatening, is very limiting and precludes any possibility of employment. Of necessity, she is living with her daughter's family. Because she lives in a small town and has no personal transportation, she is completely dependent on her daughter and friends for shopping, visiting friends, or doctor's visits. Our first visit, after many years of absence, was a wonderful time of updating; and also a time of recalling the past and looking toward the future. My friend is courageously compassionate toward herself and those around her, as she is finding new and innovative ways to live her life. My friend embraces life even though there are many apparent bumps and prickles all around.

Being courageously compassionate does not necessarily mean being successful financially or in other ways that are obvious to others. It does mean trusting others, affirming our situation, and looking forward with hope toward the future.

Overflowing compassion can completely transform a situation of hatred, cruelty, and the inconsistencies of life. Every story of compassion--the widow and her son and Elijah's intervention, the young girls who assists a classmate to heal, or visiting a hurting friend (or any time you intercede with possibilities for someone)--is a story of God working in the world. Through us.

There are amazing stories in the Bible. And there are stories today that are just as amazing. God is still speaking and working and assisting us as we engage in our world. As God encouraged Elijah and the widow, so God encourages us to be courageous and compassionate -- toward ourselves, toward our family and friends, and to all who we meet on life's journey.

Blessings to each and all.

Amen.

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