

“Endless Flour, Bountiful Hope”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
I Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

Richard E. Otty
June 5, 2016

[I Kings 17:8-16 was summarized with children in service]

Elijah was not a favorite prophet of King Ahab’s wife, Queen Jezebel, who worshiped Ba’al, the Canaanite god of agriculture and rain. Last week, we read of Elijah’s duel with the 450 prophets of Ba’al, though we omitted reading the final verse in which he had them all slaughtered – after all, this is family worship. In any case, not surprisingly, this resulted in Queen Jezebel putting a price on Elijah’s head. Yet, even before that, Jezebel had problems with Elijah for announcing Yahweh was sending a drought because of the royal family’s worship of Ba’al.

This morning’s lesson precedes last week’s slaughter. With great and likely intentional irony, Elijah is sent to a widow, who lives in the town of Zarephath, which is in the region of Sidon; lo and behold, who else is from Sidon but Queen Jezebel. So, Elijah is sent to widow in a place where his Yahweh God will be suspect, and the widow herself is likely a follower of Ba’al. Perhaps the one thing he had going for him was that Ba’al had not brought rain, and the widow is threatened, and it is only Yahweh who has found it fitting to keep refilling her flour container and oil jar so she and her son can live.

But now, another crisis arises for the widow. Her son becomes ill, and stops breathing. The widow suspects Elijah’s presence has revealed to Yahweh some sin for which she is now being punished. So, while the endless flour and oil have sustained the widow and her son, she now faces losing him again. Let’s hear how this story ends as we continue reading in I Kings 17:17-24.

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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!” ¹⁹ But he said to her, “Give me your 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. ²⁰ He cried out to the LORD, “O LORD my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?” ²¹ Then he 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.” ²² The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ 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.” ²⁴ 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.”

The likely reason our I Kings lessons from last week and this are out of order is to enable a parallel with our Gospel reading. As we hear of Jesus raising up a widow’s son, we will note how Luke penned the account in a way that would remind listeners of Elijah’s reviving the widow of Zarephath’s son. While there are differences between the two, listen for these similarities:

Elijah and Jesus are both agents sent by God;
Elijah and Jesus both approach a city and find a widow by the city gate;
Both widows have sons who have died.

Elijah prays and God revives son; Jesus touches and raises son up.

Elijah and Jesus both give a living son back to his widowed mother.

Let us hear another story of another widow's son restored to life in Luke 7:11-17:

¹¹Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. ¹²As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. ¹³When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." ¹⁴Then Jesus came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" ¹⁵The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

¹⁶Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" ¹⁷This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

I could imagine a response shot back at Elijah, "What do you mean, 'Do not be afraid?' I just told you I am down to my last handful of flour, my last bit of oil, and just a few sticks."

I could imagine a response shot back at Jesus, "What do you mean, 'Do not weep?' I am a widow. First, my husband died and now I have lost my only son. You know my status in this culture is now uncertain and my income tenuous. So, what do you mean, 'Do not weep?'"

But, the widow says nothing in our gospel account. Perhaps she sensed the compassion in Jesus that led to his, "Do not weep" assurance. Perhaps, things just moved too quickly for her to catch her breath from her deep, sobbing grief. Jesus was stepping forward, past her. He touched the funeral bier, the stretcher, on which the son's dead body was being carried. The pall bearers stood still, likely out of shock not reverence. They knew even touching the stretcher of a corpse made one ritually unclean. They stood still, and they waited with others to see what will happen.

Both the Elijah and Jesus healings are incredible stories, but I will admit my 21st century ears and mind are challenged by such stories. I find myself thinking, "If only healing; if only life; if only answers to prayer were so immediate and dramatic." A part of me sometimes wonders if such accounts are part of a gospel highlight reel, the way a sports broadcast shows the great plays of the day.

I am about as challenged by the first part of the story with Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, who has just a handful of flour, a bit of oil, and a few sticks. The diminished sizes – handful, bit, few – mark the desperation she faces. We have seen such images of hunger and need in our modern media. I recall noting how the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile a few years ago contrasted how different societies responded to such disasters, and particularly in Haiti we saw people down to their last morsels of meal, and few sticks for a fire. Today, we hear of the already limited water supplies in Middle Eastern refugee camps, with new people arriving each week to tax the handful, the bit, the few resources. Meanwhile, we complain of restrictions on watering our lawns or gardens or washing our car. And lest we set our sights only across seas and oceans, the unseen hungry of our own nation are children in our cities, and I daresay nearby towns, who wonder if there will be a meal for them to eat tonight.

In the biblical times of both Elijah and Jesus, Jewish law and tradition called for special provision to be made for the care of widows, orphans, and the poor. It was the social security system for the fragile, lost and vulnerable. Yet, the God-ordained safety net did not always work. It took the prophets to remind the faithful of their neglect of the poor. Jesus did the same in teaching his disciples to advocate for the most vulnerable and fragile, those who people avoided touching. *When Jesus saw the widow, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier.* And again, in so doing, he would be deemed ritually unclean.

The source of Jesus' words to the widow and his action, is compassion. Compassion is more than sympathy. It is more than pity. The word compassion is deep-seated, in the gut, care. Jesus was moved by what he saw. Luke uses this word for compassion in two other places – when the Good Samaritan sees the man along the road, and when the father of the one we call the Prodigal sees his lost son on the horizon. Compassion involves seeing and acting, and then incites the fervor that says, "Something has to be done!"

I expect that while some of us might have experienced a level of hunger or uncertainty in our past, these days, most, if not all of us are comfortably immune from the real fear of the widow of Zarephath's last meal with her son. We don't live a life of handfuls, bits, and few, but perhaps there were times when we came close.

In the summer following my seminary graduation, I was in Chicago completing final details to be cleared for ordination. I did not have a job, though an occasional \$35 supply preaching job kept 50 cent a gallon gas in the car, and provided money for a few groceries and even an occasional White Sox game. I had a small garden plot in the courtyard of the apartment complex, in which I had planted tomatoes and zucchini. That summer, I had many, many, many evening meals of fried zucchini and tomatoes. Yet, as sparse as provisions were that summer, I was not close to starving, and even if my situation had become too desperate, I had a seminary community upon which I could call.

Yet, while our physical bodies are fed regularly, other parts of our lives may not feel as free and full as endless flour and oil. I believe our text can speak to hungers other than that of a growling stomach, such as the droughts of creativity and hungers of spirit we may experience. Accompanying such periods comes the question of how long the drought will continue. It can occur as writer's block, or frustration that a work project just is not coming together and more than one deadline has passed. It can be felt in a dryness of creativity, or the despair of converging family issues. We wonder, when will the drought, the dryness, the despair end?

The widow of Zarephath has no reason to trust this stranger. She retrieves the water but balks at the bread request. "I'm down to a handful, a bit, a few, and with it my son and I will have our last meal." "Feed me the first bread," says Elijah. It seems demanding and harsh, but it comes with a promise – endless flour and oil until the drought ends, and wheat can again be harvested, and olives can be pressed for oil. She had no context to believe or trust. But she did, and the jar of flour did not decrease nor the jar of oil run out.

We do have a context to believe and trust. For while not perhaps an experience of endless flour, we can look back to find how we have received grace in our times of and struggles with drought, disease, despair, dryness, or doubt. It may have been a prophet sent to us in the form of a friend or stranger. It may have been a joyous experience of faith, an unexpected relief or unexplained cure from an illness. It may have been an awakened sense of a new sprout of hope, or an emerging bud of creativity. I wonder if we might think of such times and experiences as endless flour moments. If and when we recognize and recall such moments of endless flour, where grace abounds, then we can move to bountiful hope.

In a very real sense, while I did not eat zucchini for several years hence, I can look back and consider my tomato and zucchini diet some forty years ago was actually an endless flour moment. So was knowing I had a support community upon which I could call.

Luke tells us two large crowds met at the gate of the city of Nain. One crowd accompanied Jesus, excited by this new ministry of faith. This crowd was on a mission of life, full of hope.

The widow Jesus met was also accompanied by a large crowd, but they were on what could be considered a mission of death, full of sorrow and grief.

Jesus merged the two crowds and their missions as he stepped forward, out of compassion. He said, "Do not weep," out of compassion. He put his hand of life on the funeral stretcher of death, out of compassion.

A part of me wonders who will still be checking with those widows in a few weeks or months. We are wise to ask, who is continuing to respond to the needs in Haiti and Middle Eastern and Kenyan refugee camps while we turn our attentions to the latest breaking news of politics or sports? Who will continue to be present to the hungry child or homeless family after the meal is provided? These are the challenges we face in following the God of compassion we know in Jesus Christ.

Recalling experiences of endless flour can lead to bountiful hope. Bountiful hope can instill deep compassion. And deep compassion reaches past sympathy, past pity, past the words, "Do not weep." Deep compassion says, "Something has to be done."