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I Kings 17:8-16
A Handful of Meal

Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is not a “once upon a time” story. Yes, there are aspects of this story that make it seem like a fairy tale. There’s the encounter between the person of importance and the unnamed woman from the margins of life; and there is even a happy ending. It contains vivid details, which are so important to the storyteller’s art – like how the widow was out gathering sticks, how she was so poor she only had a bit of flour and a little oil, and how she had a dependent son to care for at home. But “once upon a time” stories always have an unreal quality to them, like you are seeing them through a veil of gauzy fabric. “Once upon a time” stories take normal landscapes with trees and meadows, and then insert into them dragons and castles, witches’ houses made of candy, and fairy godmothers. In the widow of Zarephath story, the veil of gauze has been pushed aside. And to truly appreciate this story, it helps to see a single detail in high-definition clarity – that of a woman holding a jar continuing not much more than a handful of meal.

In this chapter from I Kings, we are introduced to the prophet Elijah. Soon after the reigns of King David and Solomon, the territory of the twelve tribes was split into two kingdoms, Judah to the south and Israel to the north. The leadership in the northern kingdom had led the people away from proper worship of the Lord God, building temples to Baal and even sacrificing their first-born sons to idols. The scripture writer describes how Elijah proclaimed to the people of the northern kingdom that, as a consequence of their sin, a drought would fall upon the land. Water is a critical commodity in that part of the world. Far more important than oil or nuclear weapons, the future of modern Israel will likely be shaped by politics of water – who controls it and who has access to it. Such has always been the case, which is why Old Testament descriptions of paradise invariably include references to water. Think of the 23rd Psalm: *The Lord is my Shepherd who leads me beside streams of water and restores my soul.*

A second important detail is that the first person to whom Elijah is sent is not an Israelite. She is an outsider, a widow living in the coastal city of Zarephath in the region of ancient Phoenicia. She is not a daughter of Abraham; she’s not a Presbyterian; she’s not “one of us,” however you want to define that. But Elijah is sent to her by God. When Jesus pointed out this surprising detail in his first synagogue sermon, it was almost enough to get him stoned by the angry congregation (cf. Lk 4:25-26).

There is no fairy-tale sweetness in this story. An entire region is struggling during a severe drought, with the most vulnerable in its midst feeling the effects first. A woman, trying to care for her son, is picking up twigs and sticks for a small fire – upon which to cook a small meal out of a meager, final ration of flour and oil. Suddenly a stranger appears, who asks her for a drink of water – water in a time of drought! And as she

turns to provide that precious commodity, the stranger speaks a second time, asking for some bread as well. It is then that the story reaches its pivotal moment.

What happens when you are asked to give, not out of your plenty, but out of your scarcity? What happens when faith comes down to something as small and tangible as a single handful of meal?

At the top of the bulletin, I included a couple quotes from Mother Teresa, such as when she said, “We cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love.” Life is full of small things. I’m slowly emerging from a season of being with my family during a time of death, which is a season of being aware of how many small details make up a day: in terms of my father, it involved details around medicines, oxygen tubes and hospital visits, offering sips of water, rearranging a pillow. I’m also aware of other small details – of cards sent, or a neighbor cutting my parent’s lawn or bringing by fresh baked cookies.

It seems trite to say that little things matter, but they do. It may be hard to imagine how little things can make a difference, but they do. The single vote that is cast, the personal letter written to an elected official, the canned good put in the collection basket, the pledge envelope dropped in the offering plate, the word of warning to a child straying off the path, the word of compassion to someone wounded by the side of the road – all these small things matter. Yes, we need big actions – nuclear disarmament treaties, civil rights legislation, federal regulations that protect the trust of many from the greed of a few. But we also need the individuals who first sat at a segregated lunch counter or refused to get up from a Montgomery bus seat; we need the ones who light a candle, who offer a prayer, who share what they have, who trust that somehow, by God’s grace, a handful of meal will be enough.

This is not being overly-romantic; it is about being fiercely-faithful. A handful of meal withheld and hoarded vs. a handful of meal given and shared. Sometimes a life of faith hangs in the balance of such small acts.

We are about to gather at a table to share a meal, and I hope you will see everything that is done in light of the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. We’re told in the gospels that Jesus gathered in the upper room with his friends, a place where flour was baked over a fire and bread was set out to be eaten. The widow of Zarephath said, “My son and I, we will eat this bread and die.” For Christ, that comment became a literal truth, for the bread that night would become Christ’s Last Supper. There in Jerusalem, an entire city buzzed with activity – Romans worrying about terrorists and violence and how to keep control, people worrying about finances and business and taxes – while in a room behind closed doors, a small group gathered and shared a meal. And there in Zarephath, the city also went about its routines, focused on power and survival in a time of trial, while a man, a widow and child shared a simple meal from some flour and oil.

Both of these were communion meals. Both had the simple act of breaking bread together, stranger and friend alike; of sitting before God, each person full of grace and possibility and faith even if the rest of the world might never recognize those things – the widow and her guests, Jesus the rabbi from Nazareth, and those whom he loved.

A long time ago Jesus said: “This is my body.” But when he did so, he didn’t mean his body was just the bread. He meant it was the group gathered together: the group of Elijah, the widow, and the boy; the group of Peter, James, the women and servants nearby; the group that includes you and me and all who will share this simple meal.

Despite all its foibles and flaws, the church exists so that we will have a place to gather for these meals, to join the continuum of grace that includes a widow’s table in Zarephath, a Savior’s table in Jerusalem, and this table in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. We share this meal intentionally, with our small pieces of bread and our tiny cups of juice, because there is something in small deeds, small details, small expressions of grace, small acts of humility and community that make a real difference. They really do matter.

Scripture says that the widow’s jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord as spoken by Elijah (1 Kgs 17:16). In a very real way, that jar of meal has never come up short, nor has that jug of oil run dry, for as often as we eat this bread and share this cup, we proclaim a promise of life that has no end.

As I said, today’s story isn’t a “once upon a time” story. It is a “once for all time” story. Thanks be to God.