

The Widow of Zarephath

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 29, 1995, the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I was in charge of the Solanco Basketball Boosters annual pizza sale again this year. Last Saturday basketball players came to Smith Middle School in Quarryville to pick up their pizzas. Sometimes their parents were with them to pay. Several parents handed me a check for the pizzas and they said, "You're not cashing this today are you?" Or they'd ask, "Can you wait until the end of the month to deposit this?" Like a lot of us the end of their money had come before their next pay-check at the end of the month.

As a boy my family had identical meals just about every night. Little variety - and we liked it that way. Every night - meat, potatoes, and a green vegetable. You could tell ^{how close to pay day} ~~what time of the month~~ it was by the size of the portions of meat and potatoes. If my dad just got paid we'd have a generous piece of meat and a plate piled high with potatoes. As the ^{days passed} ~~month went on~~ the portions of meat and potatoes got smaller. ^{Right before his pay-check,} ~~At the end of the month~~ it was vegetable beef soup. If I didn't have a calendar, I could tell ^{when my dad was getting paid} ~~the date~~ by looking at the plate. But no matter what time of the month it was, we always had plenty to eat. We never went hungry.

Most families are faced with the anxiety of having wants far greater than our financial resources. Our reach exceeds our grasp. And it seems to me that the more I have, the more I want. You'd think it would be just the opposite. You'd think that if we had more we would want less. But that's usually not what happens. Not only do our wants exceed our resources, so often our needs - what we need to survive - what

we need to keep the creditors away from our doors- what we need exceeds what we have. I think in particular of a couple families I know personally who need expensive medical care and don't have adequate health insurance.

Our wants and needs so often exceed our resources. This is especially true in our consumer society where so much of our sense of self worth comes from the clothing we wear, the car we drive and the kind of house we live in. We have mortgages to pay, clothes to buy, insurance, medical, and educational expenses - taxes to pay - lottery tickets to buy. In addition, if we're members of the Oxford Presbyterian Church we have a church to rebuild and ministry to fulfill in the community and world. Our wants and needs exceed our resources so often.

But throughout the Bible God, in Christ, invites us to place our limited resources into the Lord's hands. Over and over we read stories in the Bible about how the Lord multiplied limited resources to accomplish the Divine purpose. Think of **the children of Israel wandering** for forty years in the Wilderness without adequate resources - and yet God clothed them! God fed them! The Lord provided drink for them! Or **think of Gideon!** The Lord told Gideon to reduce his army. He had 32,000 soldiers. The Lord told him to reduce his army to 300 soldiers! If I'd been Gideon I'd have insisted on recruiting more soldiers, but God used that limited army to bring deliverance to Israel. **Think, also, of young David** the shepherd! David slew Goliath using the limited resources of three small smooth stones and a slingshot! Think also of how Jesus took a few loaves and a few fish and fed thousands of people.

Think also of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:10-24)! Jesus refers to the widow of Zarephath in our gospel lesson. He said, "there were many widows in Israel

in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon." Luke is the only Gospel that mentions the widow of Zarephath. She wasn't a Jew. She was a foreigner. She was from the Phoenician coast, from the region of Sidon located in what is now Lebanon. Luke has a special interest in telling us about God's grace to women and outsiders like the widow of Zarephath.

Refresh your memory! The Old Testament tells us more about the widow of Zarephath. ^{Read} The story is found in 1 Kings 17. The widow lived over 800 years before the birth of Christ. She lived a couple hundred years after King David and Solomon. Solomon's kingdom had been divided by civil war. ^{after his death} The northern kingdom was called Israel and the southern kingdom, Judah. ^{In the days of Elijah & the widow} Ahab was king of Israel. Ahab - the most infamous of all of the wicked kings of Israel. A famine came upon the land of Israel. Heaven was shut up three years and six months. For three and a half years - no rain, streams dried up, no crops, flocks died, no food! The famine spilled over into the city of Zarephath in the territory of Sidon. Elijah, the prophet of God, left Israel. He went to Zarephath, to the home of a widow. Elijah said to her, "Bring me a little water... bring me a morsel of bread." But she had only a handful of meal and a little oil - enough for one meal for herself and her only son.

She wasn't a member of God's people - she was a pagan woman. Yet she listened to Elijah. She trusted the Lord to provide for her. She had more faith than God's own people. And the Lord used what she had to feed her son, to feed Elijah, to feed herself until the famine ended! Her barrel of meal and her bottle of oil never ran

out. The Lord is able to stretch limited resources and make what we have adequate.

Why does the Bible tell this story? For a number of good reasons. But before I give the good reasons, let me just say that the story is not in the Bible so that people who live comfortably can advise poor people just to trust the Lord with their meager resources. Nor is the story in the Bible so that ministers and televangelists can hoodwink poor widows out of the little money they have. No - the story is in the Bible to tell us of God's care and concern for people living on inadequate resources - and, in particular, for those poor people who, like the widow of Zarephath, are not church members.

The story is for us! The story is especially for us who feel we have inadequate resources. Unlike the widow of Zarephath, our resources may actually be adequate for our needs - we just feel that we have inadequate resources. The story is for us who are afraid to trust God with our resources and follow Christ in risky obedience.

The story ^{also} reminds God's people - reminds us - that we have a mission outside the walls of the church. People outside the church - ~~pagan~~ ^{unchurched} men and women need the Gospel. ^{Elijah went outside of Israel to a pagan woman,} Unchurched men and women are often more receptive to the word of God than those of us inside the church. ~~Pagan~~ ^{unchurched, non-ch} men and women are ~~often~~ ^{sometimes} more ready to trust the Lord with their meager resources.

^{Elijah took God's love beyond God's people to a pagan,}
I wish that we could hear modern Elijahs tell their stories. I wish that every month we could have a Presbyterian missionary tell us how God is ministering to men and women outside the church - how men and women outside the church are hearing, obeying, and trusting the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think of Elias Chacour in Israel ministering to Moslem boys and girls as well as Christians. I think of the hospital in

Gaza we visited last year - healing people with primitive equipment and limited resources. I think of the stories Dr. Forest Eggleston told us last year. Like a modern Elijah, he left a lucrative medical practice in the United States to heal people outside the covenant community in India. If we could hear these stories week after week - if we read more missionary biographies - we'd share more of our limited resources with missionaries and we'd discover that our own needs are met. We'd be so thrilled to hear how modern day widow's of Zarephath are trusting and obeying the Gospel.

Now - after the worship service and before the annual congregational meeting take a look at the 1995 budget approved by the session. Take a careful look at the budget. You'll see that many urgent needs are unmet because of limited financial resources. You'll also notice that Mission and Ministry beyond our local church- to the modern widows of Zarephath- is painfully slashed. Come to the congregational meeting! Come with your suggestions! Come with your faith in Christ! Come believing that God can take our limited resources and make them adequate. I'm confident that God has given our congregation the financial and human resources to accomplish the mission God has for us.

Luke tells us that when God's own people heard what Jesus said about the widow of Zarephath, "all in the synagogue were filled with rage." They were so enraged that they got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill so that they might hurl him off the cliff. They were enraged that God loved the world so much that he saved people outside the covenant community.

When we have limited resources & fixed expenses Missions is always the most painless place for us to cut. But...

^ Belief in missions and belief in Christ stand and fall together. The people of

There's a warning that

Nazareth rejected God's mission to those outside the church ^{and ended up rejecting} so they rejected Christ.

I believe that God so loved the world that in Christ God gave everything He had, gave His very self. If we believe that, it means that we bind ourselves to make self-giving the controlling principle of our lives. Concern for those outside the church is not something tacked on to our personal Christianity after our own needs are met. It's rooted in the character of the God who has come to us in Jesus. It's a distinctive mark of being a Christian. James S. Stewart once said, "To accept Christ is to enlist under a missionary banner." James Denny once heard a distinguished missionary say - "Some people do not believe in missions. They have no right to believe in missions: they do not believe in Christ." Harsh words? Maybe! Certainly words that stir up anger in those who don't believe in Christ's mission outside the local church. ~~"Some people do not believe in mission: They have no right to believe in missions: they do not believe in Christ."~~ But we do believe in Christ! Therefore we must believe in Christ's mission to those outside the walls of this church.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to yourself. We praise and bless you for those whom you have sent in the power of the Spirit to preach the gospel to all nations. We thank you that in all parts of the earth a community of love has been gathered together by their prayers and labors, and that in every place your servants call upon your name; for the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.