

I Kings 17:8-16

The way we treat widows, writes St. James, shows if our religion is pure and undefiled or not. The scribes of Jesus' day were in that "or not" category. They robbed widows, even devouring their houses, says Jesus. He honored widows and took care of them. He speaks highly of the widow in the temple who gave her last penny to the Lord, and He loved and provided for His own widowed mother.

And then we come to Elijah. This prophet was being cared for by ravens. They brought him food every morning and evening. But now it's a widow's turn to care for Elijah. God sends him to Zarephath and says, "*I have commanded a widow there to feed you.*" This seems backwards doesn't it? Elijah is a strong, healthy man. He should show that his religion is pure and care for the widow. But no. God reverses the roles. "*A widow,*" He says, "*(will) feed you.*"

We have widows in our midst. They are precious to God. He has afflicted them by taking their husband from them. But He expects the rest of us to care for them; to provide for them, to honor them, to love them. For understand that a large part of their heart and life was taken away. But even as we care for our widows, we see God caring for us through them.

In Elijah's day there was a severe famine. People were dying. This widow from Zarephath is about to prepare her last meal. But God's religion is pure and undefiled. He will care for this widow. He sends Elijah, and what the prophet asks this widow to do is extraordinary. "*First,*" he says, "*make me a little cake and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.*" This is a great test of faith: give her last meal to Elijah, and trust that the Lord will provide. This is not easy for anyone, but especially in the case of a widow. For a widow, by definition, is one from whom God has taken. And now this widow is told to trust the same God who has taken her husband from her.

We can attempt to put ourselves in this widow's shoes, but that is difficult. What would you have done...what would I have done...in her place? Would we have given our last morsel of food to Elijah? You and I are not about to die from lack of food. We have plenty; more than enough. When the offering plate is passed before us, we do not put in our last penny. We have plenty of pennies in the bank. But would we give our last penny to the Lord like the widow in the temple? Would we give our last morsel of food to Elijah like the widow from Zarephath?

Here's a better, more fitting question: Do we give our first penny to the Lord? Do we give our first morsel of food to Elijah? If we do not put God first in our giving, then we are not giving from faith. It doesn't take faith to give God that which we can spare. It does take faith to give to God first; to give to God trusting that He will provide, because if He doesn't, we won't make it.

But no one can give from faith unless they are given a promise from God. Such a promise was given to the widow from Zarephath. "*Thus says the Lord,*" said Elijah to her, "*the jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain.*" Before this she had no faith to speak of. She did not claim God for her own. "*As the Lord your God lives...*" she said to Elijah. What changed for her? It is the promise God gives to her through Elijah. She is given this promise. God is speaking to her. He is making it clear that He is not just Elijah's God; He is her God, too. And for her He will provide.

Faith is created by God's promises. Faith responds to what promises, not to others, but to me. I can believe in a God who cares for other people, but when I believe that God cares for me, I have faith.

And thus the widow acts in faith. She makes a cake, using the last of her flour and oil, and brings it to Elijah that he may eat. She trusts that God will provide for her. Is not this what we see in the widow in the temple? She gives her last penny to the Lord. "Foolish!" says the world. But she acts in faith. She knows not how, but she trusts that God will take care of her.

How can we act in faith as we see these widows doing? Because this is, if we are honest enough to admit it, a real struggle for us. Would we have given our last penny to the Lord? Well consider that we don't even want to give Him a tithe. We don't like setting aside ten percent of our income first for the Lord. Don't we trust Him enough? "He may provide for other out there, but I have to hang on to my money, because He won't provide for me." Is this how we think?

Would we have given our last morsel of food to Elijah? I wonder. We really struggle with understanding this walking by faith thing. We are a congregation of God's people called to trust in Him; called to act in faith at all times. But here we usually act instead like a business. Unless we have the money in hand, we cannot move forward because, after all, God will not provide.

What if the widow from Zarephath had done this, having this attitude? What if she had refused to give Elijah her last morsel of food? Would we even have her story in the Bible? Not likely. Not only would she not have been blessed by God; God would not have blessed Elijah and us through her.

How can we act in faith and be the people God calls us to be? It's not from within us; it's from Him. How do you tame a wild animal? It does not trust you. It knows not how to act in faith toward you. You must act in a caring manner toward it. You must consistently demonstrate that you will not harm it, but be for it a safe place.

God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. We are the wild animals not trusting God, not acting in faith. But for you God acted. He became vulnerable for you. He has shown you, by His death on the cross, that He is your safe place.

Consider the fact that you were a widow, for your husband was put to death on a cross. But God provides for His widows. He loves and cherishes them. In your baptism He draws near to you. He speaks the same word to you there that He spoke through Elijah to the widow. For as long as you live in the famine of this world, God will provide for you. He will not stop caring for you. All your needs will be taken care of. More than that, all your sins He forgives. Not just for some of you. He forgives all of you because Christ died for all of you. And your faith He upholds. He acts in steadfast love toward you, and so you are able to trust Him in all things.

God gave His first to you. He gave up His beloved Son, Jesus, for you. But He raised Him up, and so you are a widow provided for. In truth, you are no longer even a widow, for Christ is your living Husband who loves you dearly.

God cared for the widow from Zarephath, and through her He fed and cared for Elijah. I have found the same to be true today. I never cease to be amazed how God cares for me, and shows love for me through those who have had so much taken from them...through widows. And if you think about it you, too, will be amazed in the same way.

A congregation that has widows within her is a blessing from God. The rest of us are able to show our love to God in how we care for them. And through them God loves all of us. He cares for all of us. And He teaches us how to act in faith toward Him. Amen.