

## June 5,2016 Scripture and Sermon

### 1 Kings 17:8-16, (17-24)

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!" 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. 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?" 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." 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."

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

### **Luke 7:11-17**

Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As 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. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Let us pray...Amen.

Both our scripture readings for today concern widows with sons brought back to life. And if that was all that the scripture was about, then that

would be a pretty good message: grieving mothers having their sons restored and returned to them, with a new chance at life. We could reflect on their joy, and celebrate all the instances where resurrection, new life, new beginnings occur.

But for those of us who live in the modern world, there is a hidden message contained in today's readings that would not have been lost on the Jewish and early Christian readers of these texts: Elijah and Jesus not only restored the widow's sons to them, he restored their very identities.

In biblical times, marriage was considered a contract, and a wife was considered property of the husband. As distasteful as that might sound to our modern ears, that is the basic truth. A woman did not have the right to property, to wealth, to work, to be independent of the man who married her. Her very existence hinged upon her husband.

And, should her husband die, everything owned by her husband would go to her son. If she didn't have a son, it would go to her husband's brother.

So right from the beginning of our gospel, and towards the end of our Hebrew scripture, the death of the sons for these two women really means the death of their identity. Their son's deaths also probably mean certain poverty, and most likely death for the widows. Begging at the city gate rarely brought enough food or resources to survive.

In our Hebrew scripture, Elijah is told by God to go to Zarephath to see a widow there. Early listeners of this story would know that Zarephath was a Gentile town, so the widow there would have been a Gentile. She would have been considered ritually unclean, and Elijah would not normally have been allowed to even speak to her, much less receive food from her hands.

She was very poor, and told Elijah she only had enough meal and oil to make a little food for her and her son, so they could eat the last of it and die.

But Elijah has her give him a portion of the cake, and in return, performs a sort of 'loaves and fishes' miracle where her grain and her oil will never run out.

But her son fell ill and died. And she accused Elijah of causing his death, so he restored the son's life to show her that God really is God.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus is walking through a crowded area by the gate of the city. His followers mix with the townspeople who were heading out to bury the son of a widow. Feeling deep compassion, and without being asked, without being told anything about the situation, Jesus simply touches the stretcher upon which the son is laying and tells the young man to rise. And he does.

In an instant, the grieving woman who was about to bury her son, and begin a life of poverty had her identity restored, her future assured, and her son returned to her. This story is about so much more than just two sons being resurrected, it's about Elijah and Jesus acting out of deep compassion in ways that were forbidden at the time. It's about Elijah and Jesus performing miracles in spite of the religious and cultural taboos that were in place about touching Gentiles, and touching the dead.

So what do these stories have to do with us? We aren't prophets, we aren't messiahs, we're only faithful children of God, trying to do the best we can.

Well, we can take the foundation of these stories, that compassion for another overrides cultural taboos, and we can find ways to behave that are consistent with our faith.

Over time, since these stories were written, society had declared any number of people unclean: people with leprosy, people with cancer, people with HIV AIDS, people with STD's, people who work in the sex trade industry, refugees...the list goes on, and is constantly changing.

But what doesn't change is God's call for us to treat everybody, especially those considered the unclean, not just with respect, but with compassion

and love. And we are called not to just make their lives a little better, we are called to radically restore their identities as children of God through our love and compassion.

No, you and I are not Elijah, or Jesus, we don't have super powers to bring people back to life, but we do have the capacity to practice compassion, love, and affirmation, which can make someone feel like they've been brought back to life!

Jesus never sneered at a person and called them a sinner. Jesus never ignored a person's plea for help, but found ways to heal and help not only those who asked, but also those who didn't ask. Jesus never denied anyone access to the sacred because of who they were, or where they came from, or even who they worshiped.

If we call ourselves Christian, if our brothers and sisters around the world call themselves Christian, then why do we sneer and call others sinners, why do we ignore their pleas for help, why don't we find ways to heal and help not only those who ask, but those who don't ask, why do we pretend that we can deny others access to the sacred because of who they are, or where they come from, or who they worship?

These ancient stories are begging for us to show less judgment and more compassion. Less hatred, and more love. Less anger, and more patience. Less violence, and more peace. Less blaming, and more forgiveness.

As modern as we like to think we are, the world isn't going to get better by pointing fingers at those in need and calling them names. The world isn't going to get better by denying people access to health care and health services, even if they can't afford it. The world isn't going to get better if we wall ourselves off from the world and pretend it will go away. Our faith requires, no, I need stronger language here, our faith demands that we act upon the sacred impulse to use our compassion and our love and our resources to help those in need. Especially those that the world

considers unclean. Even if it means that the world will consider us unclean when we do so.

We don't have Jesus walking around our city gate, or through our neighborhoods, there is only you and me. We don't have Jesus teaching and preaching in the temple, revealing God's Word to the faithful, there is only you and me. We don't have Jesus meeting us out for coffee, offering forgiveness for sins and a path to eternal life...there is only you, and me, and the people we see every day. There is only you, and me, and our compassion and our love, our patience and our forgiveness, our resources and our generosity.

My prayer is that we can open our hearts and our spirits to those who are considered unclean in this day and age, and that we can offer them our compassion and love: they are children of God, just like you and me, and God expects us to treat them with love and respect, just as we wish to be treated.

In most of the modern world, women now have an identity outside of any relationship they might have. Women are no longer considered unclean. We've come a long way, and we can be grateful for the distance we've come. But as long as there are people who are considered unclean, as long as there are people who get pointed at, and called sinners, it is clear we haven't come far enough. We have a way to go yet.

Let's go together, and bring our deepest compassion and love. Amen.