

## Measuring What Matters Stewardship Series

### “Elijah and the Widow”

I Kings 17:8-16

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For this final sermon in our stewardship series, we turn today to the book of I Kings. To help prepare us to hear the reading, I want to give a little background and say something about the context, and there are really two layers to keep in mind.

The first layer is the context in which the story was remembered and told, and that was during the time when God’s people were living in exile in Babylon. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed, and as God’s people “wept by the rivers of Babylon and remembered Zion” (Psalm 137), they were asking the kinds of questions that we often find ourselves asking during hard times. Why did this happen? Where is God? What’s going to happen next? I and II Kings are part of a collection of OT books that scholars refer to as the **Deuteronomistic History**. Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and I and II Samuel are the other books in this collection, and all these books are shaped by the theology of Deuteronomy which centers on the idea of covenant faithfulness. When the people were faithful to their end of the covenant blessings would follow. When they were not, their disobedience would bring what Deuteronomy calls curses. The books in this collection were compiled during the exile to help God’s people make sense of their story and find answers to the questions they were asking about themselves, their relationship with God, and their future.

The second layer of context is the period in time when the story took place. Elijah was a prophet in Israel about 200 years before the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel and about 300

years before the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carried the people into exile. He served *while* Israel was being unfaithful to the covenant and committing the sins that would ultimately lead to destruction and exile. The King, Ahab, married Jezebel, who introduced the worship of Baal, and Israel followed her into idolatry. The story that we'll hear today takes place during a terrible drought, which Elijah declared was a direct consequence of the people's unfaithfulness.

From the background we can see that God's people struggled to be faithful in ways that we sometimes struggle ourselves. We've seen this in our sermon series so far. One of the reasons God's people found themselves in exile was because they failed to choose *the way of wisdom* we heard about in our first week. Proverbs reminded us that God created both rich and poor so that all might share in a system of giving and receiving that meets the needs of everyone. But instead of living by God's design—caring for the poor, protecting the vulnerable, and doing justice—they chose the way of folly and exploited the weak. A second reason for their exile was the temptation we talked about last week: the temptation to idolatry. In the same way that we are tempted to put our trust in wealth and possessions looking to those things for security or prosperity, God's people bent their knee to idols and placed their trust in false gods.

With all of this in mind, let's listen now to I Kings 17:8-16.

**<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying, <sup>9</sup>“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in**

your hand.” <sup>12</sup> 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.” <sup>13</sup> 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 afterward make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup> 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.

For a church that wants to be vital and remain faithful to God’s calling, it’s important to ask ourselves again and again, “what is the vision?” And right alongside that question of vision is another: Do we trust that God will provide what is needed to make that vision possible? Stewardship season provides a natural opportunity for us to ask these questions every year. As our stewardship speakers have reminded us, when we are asked to give, we are giving to make the vision of *thinking with the mind of Christ, loving with the heart of Christ, and serving with the hands of Christ* more than a slogan. We give to turn that vision into reality. We give so that people like our stewardship speakers from these last weeks, or the people who have eaten a meal at Sulzbacher, or the kids who have been coming to Alpha on Sunday nights will have and continue to have stories to tell about how they have experienced God’s presence, and grace, and provision through the ministries of this congregation.

I get excited about what God is doing and what God still wants to do in and through our church, but I know that it does happen sometimes that God’s people struggle with that second question

about trusting God to provide what is needed to make the vision possible. That trust can waver when we look around and see things, or see the *absence* of things, that make us feel like maybe the days of having a vision for the future have passed. Too many seats in the pews that were once filled are empty, and researchers keep saying that fewer and fewer people in America are interested in joining churches. Programs within the church that were once vibrant have lost steam or they've disappeared altogether. The neighborhood has changed, and it seems harder to find ways to connect with or speak the language of the people closest to us. Keeping up with the cost of maintenance on aging buildings feels like an increasingly difficult task let alone imagining upgrades or enhancements. The needs that people have are too great and beyond our capacity to address in a meaningful way. Sometimes it's easy to put on whatever the opposite of our rose-colored glasses would be – our blue or black colored glasses? – and to start feeling like the widow of Zarephath.

During the drought, God told Elijah to camp out by a little stream that would be a source of water for him, and God provided his daily bread by sending ravens to deliver bread and meat for Elijah morning and night. This was how he had been getting by until the little stream dried up. When the stream dried up, the Lord told him to go to Zarephath to find the widow who would feed him. I think it says something about God that God planned to meet Elijah's needs through a poor woman and not through someone rich as we might expect. It tells us that God can accomplish what God wants to accomplish through anyone. We don't have to be *people of means* before we can give, and it also clearly reveals that as God was the ultimate provider of both Elijah's and the widow's needs, God is the ultimate provider of all our needs, too.

When Elijah asked the widow for assistance, her response made it obvious that she was definitely not wearing any kind of rose-colored

glasses. She says she planned to make a last meager meal for herself and her child before waiting to die. In her own mind, there was no possibility of a future. She had lost too much. The “glory days” of marriage, and family, and stability were long gone. Her husband was gone and there wasn’t a new one to replace him. Her own resources had dried up and so had the resources in the land. She couldn’t see a future because she didn’t see anything to build a future with. Vision was replaced with resignation. She was resigned to the idea that her story was over and there was nothing she could do to change that.

When Elijah asked her to bring him some bread, she told him that she didn’t have anything to give him and expressed her feelings of resignation about her situation, but Elijah’s response to her was “do not be afraid,” and then he told her to make food for him first and then the food for herself and her son. She might have wondered if he heard what she said, but then Elijah promised that the Lord would see to it that her jar of meal and the jug of oil would have enough to supply for her need until the drought was over. Things change for the woman at this point in the story when she not only hears the promise that God will provide but demonstrates faith in the promise by doing what Elijah told her to do. When the woman didn’t know or believe that God was able to provide for her own needs and for the needs of others through her, she lost all vision for her life and future, but when she learned and believed that she could trust God she was willing to open her hands and take the first steps into a future she hadn’t been able to imagine before.

This point about the relationship between God’s provision and vision is the one that I think is important for us to hear today. When we focus on scarcity- on what we can’t see and what we don’t have- resignation naturally follows – and in truth, it’s almost always possible to see scarcity if that’s what we’re looking for. When we look at our church, our community, or our world and see only loss, change,

or limitation—when we look at the budget and only see not-enough—it's possible to give in to negativity and discouragement and to doubt whether we have a real future. When that happens, enthusiasm for giving can start to fade. If the only vision we have is one of inevitable decline, it's hard to get excited about supporting that.

Truthfully, I don't believe things are so dire, and I don't think most of you do either. No, things aren't exactly as they were 50, or 40, or even 20 years ago. There are beloved people who are no longer with us, and some programs and ministries that have run their course. We don't *currently* have as many young families as we once did, but it's *also* true that we have a lot of new people who bring new gifts, and new energy, and new expressions of ministry that reflect who we are today (i.e. Walking the Mourner's Path, expanded support for Family Promise, 15 men for men's group, Alpha). New things are springing up, but the most important truth of all is that God is still with us, and God will provide everything that is needed to support any dreams and visions that align with God's own. When we know and trust in God's provision, it chases away resignation and fuels a vision that we can get excited about carrying out and supporting in whatever ways and with whatever means God enables us to.

We have a chance this morning to express our faith in God as our Provider, and to show our trust by making an investment that will support the vision of thinking with Christ's mind, loving with Christ's heart, and serving with Christ's hands. As we move into the future, we may not be able to envision all the exact details of what it will look like – whose lives will be touched, who will join us in the pews, how our buildings and our campus will be used, what our influence will be in our community – but when we make our pledges we are saying that we believe God is still working and we want to be part of that work. The commitment that we make today is a step toward living in to the future that we believe God holds just like the widow's preparation of

food for Elijah was a first step into a new phase of life that she never imagined she would see. As we come today, may this act of commitment be an act of gratitude, faith, and hope that believes God has good things in store for LPC. Amen.