

*The Widow of Zarephath*

It's always fascinating to talk to people who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930s and hear the stories they can tell. Some of those stories seem so foreign to us. I know a man who grew up during the Depression. He often talks about the food. Dinner most nights was potatoes: no meat, no other vegetables, just potatoes. Sometimes lunch was a piece of white bread smeared with mustard. A real treat was spreading lard on white bread and sprinkling on a little sugar.

He also says that when his shoes got holes in their soles, he didn't get new shoes, he put newspaper in his old shoes to cover up the holes. He never saw a barber; his father gave his three boys their haircuts. As the oldest, he was always first and got the worst haircut because it took the "old man" some time to warm up. There was no money for a luxury like dentistry. Chewing roofing tar removed stains and tartar. Rinsing with salt water cured bleeding gums. Pliers worked well on pulling problem teeth. It's hard for us to imagine living like that. It's hard for us to imagine that was life in America less than 100 years ago.

The American Great Depression is in some ways similar to what the town of Zarephath was going through in the days of the prophet Elijah. Zarephath was known as rich city, famous for its exports of wine, grain and olive oil. But there was a drought, no rain was falling, and the city had fallen on hard economic times. There was no more wine, grain or oil to either export or consume. The cause of the draught was the prophet Elijah's curse.

Actually, the cause of the draught was the Lord's divine displeasure. God was angry with the people and so He announced through Elijah that He was going to shut up the heavens. So even more accurately then, the cause of the draught was the people's sin. They chased after the foreign God named Baal, a nature god who was supposed to bring the rain needed for crops to grow. The drought and its resolution would show that it is the Lord our God who sends and gives prosperity, not any other God .

That may seem like a pretty primitive idea, that God would punish the people's sin with a drought and an economic downturn. Would the Lord really do such a thing back then? Would God do such a thing today? It's usually a good idea to avoid trying to matching up sins and punishments in one-to-one correspondence. But when we consider that the current worldwide economic crisis was caused at least in part by greed, avarice and corruption, and by shortsighted thinking and leaving beyond our means, we can say that, yes, at the very least God may be allowing us to experience some of the consequences of our sin. And, as always happens when there is widespread sin, the innocent suffer along with the guilty. The widow of Zarephath suffered as much as or more than the wealthy importers and exporters. And who suffers the worst today? The poorest of the poor.

But God had something special in store for the poor widow of Zarephath, who was not an Israelite, not one of God's "Chosen People," but a foreigner. As if by chance she meets the prophet Elijah. The prophet asks her for something to eat, which strikes us as odd that a man, who could conceivably work for a living, would ask for a handout from a poor widow. The widow explained that she had just enough food left for one meal for her and her son,

which they would eat and then starve to death. Elijah instructs her to make him a pancake of sorts and then guarantees her that she will not run out of flour or oil until the drought is over and prosperity returns. Again, we don't want to make this sound too *quid pro quo*, as if her following Elijah's command is the magic that makes the miracle happen. Yet, when a prophet instructs us to do something, it is usually better for us if we do it.

So what's the point of the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath? One lesson there for us is that the Lord will provide. God will give us what's necessary. He doesn't always give us riches and wealth, he didn't make the widow independently wealthy, but he gave her just enough food to survive the drought. To quote that famous song by the Rolling Stones, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you just might find, you get what need." And, I would add to Mick Jagger's lyrics, what we need comes from the hand of God.

These are tough times for everyone financially. Things are not that different today from Zarephath during the Great Drought or America during the Great Depression. What are we as Christian people to do? Specifically on this day that we celebrate Harvest and Stewardship Sundays, what are we to do?

I met another man who grew up during the Depression, who, looking back on his childhood said, "Yeah, I guess we were poor, but I didn't know it then. What I remember was having a lot of fun." I knew another woman who said, "I grew up on a farm and we didn't have much of anything else, but we did have food. And whenever anybody, even the hobos, showed up at our door, my mother never let them go away hungry." And I knew yet

another woman, a child during the Depression, whose parents couldn't afford to feed and cloth her, so a childless aunt and uncle bought those necessities for her. When that little girl grew up, and the aunt and uncle grew elderly and sickly, she nursed them until they passed.

In times of financial trouble, in times of need, we give. As Bishop McCoid often said when talking about stewardship, “God so loved the world that He gave...” Giving is an act of love, and whether our gift is small or large doesn't matter, what matters is that hearts full of faith and touched by Christ's love give. We give of ourselves to others. We share what we have.

There's another widow in our scripture lessons today, a widow in the temple, who gave out of her poverty all she had to live on. That's an incredible act of faith, especially when, as we read in the first verses of the gospel reading today, that her offering may have been going to help support the scribes who were possibly less than good stewards of what was entrusted to their keeping. We would hope, in fact, we would demand that the scribes do a better job of using the temple offerings for good. But that seems not to be so much of a concern for the widow. Her giving is based solely on her relationship with the Lord. Those two coins represented her whole life.

Jesus commendation of the widow's offering was his last public speech; from then on until his crucifixion he would speak only to his disciples. It's no coincidence that shortly after the widow made her offering, Jesus would offer himself up on the cross for our redemption. “God so loved the world that He gave his only son so that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” That is the definitive offering, and Jesus' offering

gives us everything we need. Some people say that if you have your health you have everything, but that's not true. You need Jesus more than you need your health. You need Jesus more than you need your retirement plan. If there's anything we think we need more than Jesus, even in a bad economy, we're missing the point.

So how do we live as God's people in a time of economic hardship? We can live joyfully. If we focus on Christ we might not notice what else we are missing materially. We just might find that serving the Lord is more fun than keeping up with the Jones'. We can live generously. If we are truly confident that God will give us all we need than it is no hardship to share what we have with others. Helping others however we can is a big part of our Christian life.

And we can live expectantly. God will take care of us. We cannot out give God; God is always more generous than we are. As they say, "Tough times don't last, but tough people do." Just as the rains for Zarephath came again and they knew prosperity once more, so will our economic downturn become an upturn one day, hopefully. God will provide for his people. So hang in there. Hang tough. Wait on the Lord. He will come through in His time, which is the right time. In the meanwhile, do your duty. Do what you are called to do. Be generous. Be faithful. Give of yourself. That's the Christ-like way. Amen.