

“Hope-filled Giving”

November 8, 2009

Scripture: I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

The Rev. William T. Hennessy

For nearly three years a drought had been visited upon Israel during Elijah’s time as a prophet. This occurred because of the king’s failure to keep covenant. King Ahab married, you remember, Jezebel. Jezebel was not an Israelite and was a follower of the god Baal.

The drought caused widespread hardship. A hardship ignored by the king and queen who were too busy consolidating their power to worry about the plight of their subjects. So Elijah was sent by God to the region of Sidon, a gentile region, and, coincidentally, the home region of Jezebel. While the king and queen sit in comfort in Jerusalem, it is Elijah who goes to visit and care for their poor; while Baal is inert and feckless in the face of drought and starvation and despair, it is the God of Israel who will intervene and bring hope.

The starving widow who is ready to eat her last meal with her son, ready to curl up and die, is given a hard choice. Does she trust this stranger and give him what he asks, when she has so little to give or does she leave him there at the gate to surely die? To be a widow was to be without any protection or any means of survival in a hostile world. She has to look after her own. It would have been perfectly reasonable, certainly no sin, if she had refused to accommodate Elijah. But somehow she finds it within herself to trust him, a man who to her was a foreigner and infidel, to trust Elijah and dare to hope.

Within the Roman Empire the coins described in Mark’s Gospel were the smallest pieces of currency available. They were worth just this side of nothing. They were a fraction of a drop in the bucket of the temple treasury. Jesus sees this woman make her way to the ornate, horn-shaped coffer and drop these two puny coins in, and he is appalled. He has just accused the scribes, the religious leaders, of devouring the houses of widows, and he sees just how low one such widow has been brought.

Now I don’t mean to say that what she does isn’t admirable, we’ve all been raised to admire the widow and her mite, but it is also unjust. What sort of a system requires someone that poor to give away what they cannot possibly afford? It’s wrong. And Jesus knows it’s wrong because he’s just said the ones responsible for this widow are too busy admiring themselves in the mirror and accepting public praise to pay any attention to her suffering.

These two vignettes from the Bible, so removed from one another chronologically, act as a sort of bridge between us and the God who calls us. In ancient Israel God intervenes in the life of a widow who is the victim of injustice and neglect. God becomes her benefactor and her hope even though as a foreigner she has no reason to expect anything from the God of Israel.

In the same way Jesus becomes a champion for a widow who isn’t even aware of his presence. He exposes the injustice at work at the heart of Israel’s life, at the very temple itself, and not only announces God’s intervention, but becomes God’s intervention by bearing the injustice and entering the suffering firsthand.

This is the God we’re dealing with, a God who refuses to stand by and allow suffering to continue unrelieved.

Yet how do we account for the reality of so much poverty and hunger in our world still? How do we carry the message of a God who relieves suffering into a world where so many endure unimaginable hardship? I can understand why, for many, religion has become a purely private matter, something for their own well-being but not a journey they share with others. Because once you align yourself with the God revealed in

scripture, the God who calls us into community and into the world, you cannot avoid being moved by injustice and suffering.

Now I don't think that means we're expected to eliminate the world's hardships. I don't think we can do that. But in the face of despair we are called to offer hope. Sometimes that comes in the form of direct help that has an immediate effect. But more often it comes through a way of living in the world that refuses to acknowledge the power of despair and celebrates hope in spite of our circumstances.

Years ago I traveled with a group from college to the Yucatan Peninsula to spend a couple of weeks working in a village and traveling in the area to learn about life in that part of the world. The village we stayed was called San Juan de Dios. It was tucked back in the jungle a little over 60 miles from Cancun. There were maybe 50 or so adults living there and, as our host minister told us, about 200 children.

We lived in the homes of some of the residents, members of the small Presbyterian church in the village. We had arrived a couple of days after Christmas and were there through New Year's. Each day our group prepared our own breakfasts and suppers, but lunch was spent with the families. I'll never forget on New Year's Day sitting down to soup and re-fried beans, a huge treat for the 4 kids living in the home where I stayed, and seeing a little meat in the soup.

I didn't appreciate at the time how little that family could afford to share that meal with me. The six of them lived in a one room shack with packed dirt floors and thatch walls held together with nails driven through bottle caps. They had one light bulb hanging from the ceiling and no running water at all, not even a pump. They had no more business giving me something to eat than I had taking it. Yet they were delighted to feed me. There was never a moment's hesitation, never a hint of resentment. Their lives seemed full of joy and what they gave was always hope-filled.

As I look back on that time, I think I believed I was helping to bring something important to the families of that village. But what I've come to realize is they were the presence of Christ for me and not the other way around. They gave me an example of living that I am still trying to live up to.

I don't know what happened to that family anymore than I know what became of the woman at Zarephath or the widow in the temple. But my understanding of who God is and how God works in the world has been shaped by them. And I imagine most of you could think of someone you've encountered who has taught you an unexpected lesson of hope.

We live in a world that is hungry for hope. A world that is in such pain that for many the possibility of joy is nearly unthinkable. God is calling us to refuse to stand by and let that hunger go on without relief. Christ is calling us to see the injustice at work in the world and to join him in bearing that injustice and offering ourselves for the sake of those who suffer.

What we have may seem inadequate or we might feel we don't have anything to spare, but through our hope-filled giving God's presence in the world will be revealed and our longing for joy will be satisfied at last.

Amen