

More than Enough

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Ahab was a king of Israel who married a woman named Jezebel. Jezebel did not worship the God of Israel. Jezebel worshipped Baal and Ahab was happy to join her, insisting that all of his subjects follow suit. Baal was thought to bring storms to the land in the rainy season, after which the ground got progressively dryer, and eventually all vegetation died. Ahab worshipped and offered sacrifices to Baal in order to insure the timely arrival of the annual rains. Several times what he sacrificed were his own children. In exchange Baal provided enough rain to get Ahab and his people through the annual drought. Anyone with foresight and common sense would be able to store away enough provisions during the wet to get them and their families through the dry--provided they stuck to their budgets.

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Elijah has informed king Ahab that Baal has no power over rain or drought, over life or death. Rather, it is the God of Israel who controls these things. To illustrate this Elijah declares in the name of the God of Israel, a three year drought.

During that drought, God sends Elijah to a town called Zarephath where he tells him that a widow will feed him.

When he arrives in town he sees the widow gathering sticks and calls to her. "Bring me a little water so I may drink." As she is on her way with the now quite precious water, he calls to her again asking for her to give him bread. She announces to him that she has no bread and only a bit of meal in a jar and a very small jug of oil. The people had planned for one season of drought as always. But this time, the drought continued and there just was no more meal. She would have loved to feed him. Under different circumstances. The new plan she tells him is to take the sticks she has gathered, go home, prepare the meal into a cake, give some to her son and then die with him of starvation. So no I can't give you bread. I am sorry. There just isn't any more grain.

Elijah, speaks not to her circumstance but to her heart. He is not condescending or rude. "Do not be afraid," he says, "go ahead and continue with your plan. But first, make a little cake and bring it to me. Then make something for yourself and your son." He tells her that God has promised that her jar will never be empty and her oil will not run out.

At that moment she had a choice. To suffer her family's last supper in silence or to move through her fear in faith.

For some reason, she decided to trust him. The story does not tell us why, what she saw or what changed. We only know that she went home and did as Elijah said. She made him a cake and then her son and her self, and saw that there was more meal. And there was oil. She fed her entire household. Still...enough. More than enough. And so she made more the next morning. And then again. There was meal and oil and there did not seem to be an end to enough. The grain did not fill a barn. A silo was not miraculously filled. It was a simple bowl, in the cupboard of a simple family, that was simply never empty.

Each time she fed her visitor, it made no meaningful dent in her resources. Nothing about how she lived really changed. Knowing that she and her family would not go hungry as she had feared. Well that knowledge changed everything.

I believe that the members of Saint Ann's stand at a crossroad similar to the one that the widow stood in that day. It is stewardship season. You got the mailing, and the card. We have been invited to give. Sacrificially. We are told that God will provide and that we will always have enough. More than enough. But in some ways all we can see is our budget. We rationed our resources for the annual dry season, never anticipating an economic crisis. Never considering that we might lose our rector. Underestimating the real challenges of inviting and incorporating new families into our faith community. Three big things. Three years of drought. For which we did not plan.

And now, we say, there is no money. We would love to reach out, but present circumstances have made us individually and corporately unable to make such sacrifices. We feel that we do not have enough resources to invest boldly in our future and yet, if we do not grow many of us fear, that Saint Ann's will gradually, eventually, tragically die. Some of us have resigned ourselves to this eventuality, hoping to make the best of things and enjoy the fellowship as it is, until it isn't. Others grieve the potential, gradual diminution of this vibrant community, simultaneously decrying our powerlessness to halt her deterioration. And THERE ARE WIDOWS IN THE HOUSE. Many here have begun the process of shaping the cakes for the future, unsure if they themselves will eat at the end of the day. But stepping out in faith and hoping against hope that the promises are true.

Doubtless there were other widows, laborers and leaders who played out the widow's initial plan. This widow, lowly, bereft, we only know about her because she stood at that point of disillusionment and resignation and turned. She decided to let go of her fear and trust. She turned around. The word repent means to turn around.

Whether or not you need to turn around is really based on which direction you are facing. And only you and God know the answer to that. What are you saying with your

words and your wallet about what kind of community this is and what kind of God you worship.

(MOVE TO LECTERN)

Last week Jack Spaeth spoke at our Griswold forum about the power of increasingly sacrificial giving in his life. He was clearly living in the liberation of a perpetually full jar and jug. We asked him how we might help people get it about giving. His answer was simple: Get people who give to tell their stories.

I have moved over here because there is a particular authority and responsibility that a preacher carries into the pulpit. An obligation to rightly handle the word, carefully preaching the Gospel. I am standing over here now (with Nancy's permission) to tell a bit of my story in my own voice.

When I was 16 I fell in love with Jesus. I understood from the Bible that God asked not merely a tithe from me, but for a 100% investment. I would get a babysitting job and place the \$20 in the plate, only to get a call that afternoon from a parent with a \$40 need. I was diggin this new God math.

When I was 19 I took a year off from college to try to discern God's will for me. I was led in prayer to the conclusion that I was called to attend a church in the city of Pittsburgh, about an hour from my home. I had no money and I didn't have a car. But I was convinced this was from God.

The next day a family friend and Amway salesman asked if he could come to the house to meet with me. He said he had a proposition for me. After exchanging pleasantries I launched into my myriad objections to pyramid marketing schemes. Taken aback he said that the reason he had come over was to tell me that his daughter was spending the year abroad and he was concerned about her car sitting in the garage. He wondered if I would be willing to drive it for a year. Not only did God provide a car but it just so happened to be the car I had always wanted, a yellow Volkswagen bug.

In grad school in the early 90s, I felt led in prayer to imagine my heart's desire for a place to live. it was hard to let myself imagine things I could not afford. I imagined a farm with rolling hills, out in the country with some woods. Two days later I overheard a professor saying to someone, "We have taken this position in Atlanta and need to go fairly quickly. But we won't be able to sell the farm that fast and need someone to stay there and feed the horses until next summer. Do you know anyone who might be able to do that? That's my house! I said.

When I was in graduate school, Yale was hosting a special gathering of women African theologians. Their primary agenda was to discuss the AIDS crisis in Africa. Since talk of sex was taboo in most of their worlds, there was no opportunity to educate. The upshot of the conference was that these women would create a kind of underground sex education railroad. I had two hundred dollars in my checking account... which I gave them. The very next day I was informed that I was one of two students who had been admitted for transfer into the Institute for Sacred Music and the Arts, an admission that included a full scholarship. Two hundred for twenty thousand. Still diggin the new math.

There are many more stories where that came from and I love to talk about God's love and faithfulness. Even today. Last week we got a bill from the Hospital. Paltry compared with the bizillion dollars of care my family received over the past two months, but \$600 none the less. 600 that were not in the budget. Two months ago I was in a minor fender bender when a truck hit me from behind. Last week the other party's insurance company called to settle the claim for my pain and inconvenience. He asked if \$670 would be sufficient. A check is already in the mail. Enough and more than enough.

Over and over. Out of the blue. Furniture. Instruments. Housing. Food. Unsolicited. Unmerited gifts out of God's abundant economy. Many times on the heels of scary giving. Often simply God's generous hand. Each time provision arrives I feel like God is saying, "Yes. This is the path. Stay the course. Open your hands. What's yours is mine. And what's mine is yours."
(No mystery whose the winner in that deal.)

There is a passage that is often translated "God loves the cheerful giver." Most Biblical scholars contend that a truer translation would be God loves the hilarious giver. I wonder if that is how the widow felt. Wait, watch this. Look. I made a loaf, and look, more meal and oil. Wait. Watch, I'll do it again. Isn't that crazy. As you can probably guess I have come to give in this way and find it thrilling. And God has not only provided for my needs, but has heard and treasured the desires of my heart.

That's it. A peek into my cupboard. It doesn't look like much, but I assure you, it is certainly more than enough for me.