

“Nothing to Offer”¹

I.

I read this story and I have to wonder: Is the prophet Elijah rude, or just stupid? Begging from a penniless widow! It's like wearing white shoes in February or blowing your nose in your napkin. I mean, seriously: who does that?

But I am starting in the middle of the story, and that can be a little confusing. Let's back up just a bit.² Today, and for the next several weeks, we take up the tale of the prophet Elijah. Nine centuries before the birth of Jesus, King Ahab rules Israel, along with his foreign-born wife, Jezebel. But despite her marriage into Israel's royal family, the queen remains a devoted follower of Baal –the god of her native Phoenicia, thought to control the weather. And Jezebel cannot keep her religion to herself. She actively promotes the worship of Baal throughout the land and by all accounts it's catching on. Baal is getting bigger than the Beatles.³

So now we have a problem. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is reputed to be a jealous God, unwilling to share the people of Israel with any rival. And that is why, in I Kings 17, the prophet Elijah abruptly appears on the scene, denouncing the nation's divided loyalties and declaring that there will be no rain until he says so. Yahweh will make a full-frontal assault on Baal's claim to control the weather.⁴

The word of the prophet comes to pass. A severe drought sets in, exposing Baal as a fraud. Distraught and distressed at this insult to her god, the queen demands the prophet's head. Elijah becomes Israel's Most Wanted Man, and has to hide out in the wilderness for awhile.

But droughts do not distinguish between genuine prophets of God and just plain folks. Before long, Elijah is as dried up and desperate as anyone else. And that is where we pick up the story today, with God announcing what has to sound like a truly terrible idea: “*Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon...*” Zarephath, in Sidon. Foreign soil. Jezebel's old stomping grounds. It is basically Baal's backyard. Why would Elijah go there? “*I have commanded a widow there to feed you.*”

And Elijah has got to wonder if God has gone 'round the bend.

But what else can he do? Out of options, hungry and homeless, Elijah scrapes together enough money for a Greyhound ticket to Zarephath, where he imagines some kindly widow waits to feed him.

I doubt the widow sees it that way. It is not even clear to me if God ever bothered to let her in on this little plan. When we first meet her, she is not on the lookout for some hungry prophet; she seems a little preoccupied with the question of her own survival.

Who can blame her? Remember, widows occupy a precarious place in the patriarchal order of the ancient world. Without a husband to support her, and 3,000 years before the first Social Security check, she most likely gets by begging. She most likely has little to spare, especially during a drought. And God has commanded *her* to care for Elijah? She can barely care for herself and her son.

So there she is, minding her own business, when this strange, sorry-looking, sun-burned Israelite—the foreign prophet of a foreign God—comes stumbling up to her and asks, in his broken schoolboy Phoenician: “Bring me a little water and bring me a little bread.”

Her response could break your heart: “*I have nothing baked,*” she says, “*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.*”

What could she possibly have to offer?

II.

Do you know that feeling? That sick, sinking feeling when you don’t have one more dime to spare, one more hour to carve out, one more ounce of patience or goodwill?

There is a lot of that going around these days. Back in 2006, Merriam Webster added a new term to the dictionary: “sandwich generation.” It refers to people—baby boomers, mostly—who care for their aging parents while still supporting their own children.⁵ Their dilemma is, in many ways, an apt symbol for our times—everybody trying to do right by too many people; everybody learning to live with blessings that, on occasion, feel more like burdens.

You may not belong to the sandwich generation, but I bet you know what I am talking about. People are stretched so thin—our kids’ juggle school and sports and music and volunteer work; their parents try to raise them right and do a little good in this world, all the while working longer hours for less money, and older folks are discovering that “retired” is just another world for “busy.”

We have some spare moments—scarce, fleeting, and mostly filled with all our anxious thoughts: When will we be able to retire, and can we do it with dignity?

How will we ever pay for college? Can I really fit one more activity into a calendar groaning under the weight of so much stuff?

And let's be honest: church can make matters worse. In one way or another, we're always asking you to do a little more around here: increase your pledge, serve on a board, participate in a fundraiser, build a Habitat house, clean up Brown's Woods, march in the Pride parade, "find the way that you will plug in to the life of Plymouth Church."

All worthwhile things. We mean well when we ask you to do them. But I know that sometimes—too many times—it feels like another pound of flesh. We ask more and more, even as you feel like you have less and less.

Do you know that feeling? I do. To me, it feels a lot like fear. What if I just can't do it? What if I have nothing left to offer?

III.

But did you notice Elijah's response? *Do not be afraid*. That is almost always the first word of the Gospel. In this particular instance, however, it seems a little premature. Isn't fear the only rational response to this widow's situation? She has next to nothing. If she shares with the prophet, she will have even less. Why shouldn't she be afraid?

Only one reason I can think of: God is about to get involved.

Don't be afraid, says Elijah. Go ahead with your plan. Use your meal and your oil to make that last desperate meal for yourself, and your son. But first—do not miss the nerve of the prophet here—but *first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me*. Start out by sharing your stuff. Then do whatever you want with the leftovers.

It is an audacious, ridiculous, downright rude request. I don't know why she goes along with it. Maybe even in dire straits she cannot say no to a starving man. Maybe, in the midst of this drought, she has managed to hold on to some small sliver of human decency. Or maybe it is plain desperation. If her luck has finally run out, well, three people can starve in her kitchen as easily as two.⁶ For whatever reason, she does what the prophet asks her to do; she shares some of her meager resources with the stranger at her door.

And then something extraordinary happens: God really does come through. Her small act of sharing means the end of scarcity for herself and her son. The jar of meal does not empty. The jug of oil does not fail. A prophet, a widow and her son—all three sustained by the life-giving grace of God.

She has nothing to offer. But when God gets involved, her nothing is more than enough.

IV.

Now, we have to be careful here. This sermon is swerving dangerously close to train-wreck territory. So let me be clear: not every stranger is sent to us by God. Not every demand deserves a response. We are not called to become what Will Willimon labels “quivering masses of availability.”⁷ Sometimes we really should say “no.”

But I suspect we already know that. Saying “no” is one of life’s basic coping skills. All of us do it, every single day. We hang up on telemarketers; hold on to our wallets; come up with all kinds of really clever and creative excuses. We stare steadily at the carpet whenever anyone asks for volunteers. (I have seen some of you do it).

We know how to say “no”; the problem is that, sometimes—just sometimes—we really might want to say “yes.” We feel some pang in our conscience, some stirring of the Spirit, some nagging sense of call. The pain of this world cries out to us in some specific way and we want to respond, we long to respond. But we don’t do it. We are afraid to do it. Too busy, too stressed. We think we have nothing to offer.

And maybe we don’t. But neither did the widow of Zarephath.

You see, sometimes the stranger really *is* sent to us by God. Sometimes the suffering is something that *we* are supposed to address. Sometimes the work of God requires our hands, our feet. Sometimes our own salvation depends on our connection with someone else; on our willingness to share what we’ve got.

Don’t be afraid. In the moments when we manage to do that—when we learn to let go and to trust, if only a little, that God is working under our noses—when we do that, we discover that it’s *not* about us. It is not about our bank account, or our big talent, or anything we think we have to offer. It’s not about us; it’s about that good and gracious One who wants to give some gift to the world and who wants to do it through us. When we give in and go along, when we share just a little of what we have got, we discover that we do have enough: Enough for ourselves. Enough for our loved ones. Maybe even enough to bless the wider world.

In the strange economy of God, even our nothing is more than enough.

Thanks be to God.

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667
E-mail: mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com

Notes

1 The title and central idea of this sermon was inspired by the comment of Kate Huey at SAMUEL, the UCC's on-line lectionary resource: "God asks Elijah to seek help from a nobody who has nothing." Read more here: <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/june-06-2010-tenth-sunday.html>

2 For the back-story that follows, see the entries on "Elijah," "Jezebel," "Ahab," and "Baal" in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

3 Bernard Anderson draws our attention to two salient features of the Baal cult in Ahab's Israel. First, Ahab thought he was remaining loyal to Yahweh, as can be seen from the recurrence of the term *Yah* in the names of his children. Second, Baal worship had obvious political and imperial overtones –by worshipping the god of Phoenicia, Israel identifies itself as a client state of the Phoenician empire.

4 Tremper Longman III draws our attention to the way in which a drought constitutes a direct challenge to the claims of Baal. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts. The First Readings: The Old Testament and Acts*. Roger E. Van Hard, Editor. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.230-232.

5 Not only does the term have its own entry in the dictionary; it has its own Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sandwich_generation

6 I owe this sentence to a comment made by David Ruhe in our weekly staff Bible study.

7 The line comes from his book *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002).