

Sermon

June 5, 2016

Texts: 1 Kings 17: 17-24

Luke 7:11 – 17

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The widow at Zarephath and the widow at Nain – two stories some 600 to 900 hundred years apart and yet so much the same. In the Jewish kingdom where Elijah was prophet, widows were oppressed in the patriarchal system that left them with nothing and of no stature. With all of God's call to care for the widow and the orphan, some 600 to 900 years later Jesus was born into a society where widows fared no better – the death of a widow's son, still meant that she was left to die.

When Elijah came to stay with the widow at Zarephath, she and her son were starving and on the verge of death. When he asked for a morsel of bread, she told him that she had nothing prepared – that she was gathering sticks to go home and use the last of their meal and the last of their oil to prepare a final supper for she and her son. Then they would die. Elijah instructed her to prepare a meal for all of them, and assured her that her meal and her oil would not run out. And, indeed, she fed them and all of her household for days.

But then he son becomes very ill and the story tells us that there was “no breath in him.”

And the woman lashes out at Elijah. What do you have against me?! You remind me of my sin and you have caused the death of my son!

And then Elijah takes her son and places him on his bed, and Elijah lashes out at God!

“O Lord my God have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son? And then Elijah touches the boy 3 times. The scripture says Elijah stretched himself upon the child. I can picture an effort to breath life back into that child. And he begs God to let the child’s life come into him again. And it did. Elijah picked up the child and gave him to his mother.

And the woman says to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.

And then there is the parallel story in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has healed the centurion’s slave, and then Jesus was going into the city of Nain when at the gate of the city he met a funeral procession in which a man was being carried out on a funeral bier. And walking in mourning with the body was the man’s mother, a widow. She at least had community around her – a large crowd from the town. And Luke tells us that when Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her. He told her not to weep and then he touched the funeral bier and the widows son sat up ... and here is that phrase ... Jesus did exact what Elijah had done. He “gave him to his mother.”

And the people were seized by fear or awe and they glorified God, saying “ A great prophet has risen among us!

Both Elijah and Jesus acted out of compassion for the widow. In the story of Elijah at Zarephath, the widow calls out blaming Elijah and Elijah calls out blaming God and then Elijah begs God to bring breath, life to the child again.

In the story of Jesus at Nain, we do not hear of the widow crying out to God or to Jesus specifically, but we do know that she was following her son's body and weeping, and that Jesus both spoke assurance to her and he reached out to touch the bier – making himself unclean for this sake of this widow and her son.

If anything can bring us to cry out to God, to pray healing and life for one who is sick or dying, it is the love and compassion that we feel. It is the sense of another's suffering. Sometimes the sense of our own loss.

And yet, how often we are hesitant to pray. Hesitant to open our hearts to God; to lay our needs before the God of life. Are we afraid we will ask for something that is not possible? Are we afraid we will ask for the wrong thing? Pray improperly? Do we let our heads get in the way of our hearts and our faith?

Elijah and Jesus have a couple of things to say to us this morning:

First, Sometimes we are afraid of our compassion. Our compassion makes us vulnerable. Our compassion opens our eyes to pain we had rather not see – because once we have seen the fear and hurt of another, and the systems cause it we cannot unsee it. Once we have heard the story of the widow, we cannot unhear it. Jesus and Elijah both

saw and had compassion on the widow; they saw her vulnerability. In both stories, we hear the words, “he gave him to his mother.” Elijah and Jesus acted for her.

We need not be afraid of our compassion. Yes, our compassion can bring anger – as Elijah’s anger when he lashed out at God. Our compassion opens us to God; opens us to be honest with God and honest with ourselves about the condition of God’s people. Our compassion makes it possible for us to see where God is working in the world. And finally our compassion for others makes it possible for us to understand God’s compassion for us.

Second, we can cry out to God, we can be angry at God, we can question as the widow and Elijah did in the face of that child’s illness and death. And we can pray to God for life. God made us and gave us a passion for justice. God made us and gave us a love and care for each other. God made us and gave a desire to preserve life. When our deepest hearts are connected to God we may trust God with our cry for life. We may trust God with our deepest most honest prayer.

I am convinced that sometimes we don’t find value in prayer, or feel uncomfortable with prayer, because we have not dared to pray honestly. Deep honest prayer changes us. It cracks open our frozen hearts. Prayer empowers us to embody the hope of God. Do we get everything we pray for? No. But we are transformed in the process of crying out for life. We are transformed when we allow God’s Spirit to pray through us.

Often we don't know how to pray for those who seem distant from us. Or we long for ways to hold God's love and a person or people in prayer. Sometime powerful symbols help us to express our prayer. One church made and sent Paper Peace Cranes to Newtown, Connecticut following the school shooting there. The were made with and carried the prayer of a community. Those cranes were then sent by the Church in Newtown to the Church in Ferguson when Michael Brown was killed. And then the Church in Ferguson sent the cranes to Charleston.

Sometimes we pray not only through our words but through Prayer Shawls given to remind one that he or she is enfolded in God's love and in the prayers of the community.

How do you channel your need or desire to pray? I propose that we use this summer to explore prayer; to find forms of prayer that are most significant for us. We will do this in WSPR, and Worship, and through some online suggestions.

And we'll begin this morning with an opportunity to write our prayers, or express them through drawn symbols, and / or to come for prayer and anointing with oil for healing of body or spirit.

Amen.