

**Sermon: Handful of Flour/Heart Full of Gratitude****Scripture: I Kings 17****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 30, 2022**

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Tonight the youth in Forum will be walking around town to give people an opportunity to give. We'll leave bags at houses asking them across the course of the week to fill it with needed goods for the ENKA pantry and then the following week we'll go around and collect them. Giving people an opportunity to give. That's also what we are doing during our pledge drive, just giving you, giving us all, an opportunity to give, encouraging the spiritual virtue of generosity, which I talked about last Sunday being one of the very powerful tools for addressing the deadly sin of pride, according to the desert fathers and mothers. Gratitude is one of those tools, you can't have a prideful heart and a grateful heart and generosity the other, pride and generosity usually undermine one another.

Last week it was the prideful Pharisaic Jew that Jesus contrasted with the humble tax collector Jew and we heard that in the Kingdom of God, the humble will be exalted and the exalted humbled. And this week we have another story of the humbled and the exalted in the midst of political, economic and environmental strife of the first century Mediterranean world.

It begins with drought, the earth ravaged by a lack of rain. The Bible explains why the climate was having trouble and it says quote clearly that the earth is ravaged because of human sin. Specifically it describes that Israel's King, Ahab, is in devotion to other gods, and that's why the drought. It's interesting that whether it's a flood as in Noah's story or a drought as in this one, the Bible seems remarkably comfortable with the notion that humans impact the climate

significantly... not sure why there are so many Christians still resistant to that notion, that our sinfulness effects the earth herself, that our deadly sins of pride and greed, to say nothing of gluttony and sloth, change our climate. That's base-line fundamental Judeo-Christian theology.

So due to Ahab's sin, as the prophet Elijah proclaims, the region will fall into drought and when it happens Elijah goes from being a state-sponsored prophet feasting in the King's palace, to running for his life in the wilderness, reliant on ravens to feed him. Ah, the prophet's plight, the speaking truth to power, and suffering for it. Whether 2<sup>nd</sup> century or 21<sup>st</sup> century the story seems to be the same, bad actors in seats of power directing their resources towards bolstering their power and undermining any threat to their power rather than repenting and course correcting. And who suffers for it? The earth does and the poor, the land and the powerless. We who have power and greater agency in our lives tend to be better able to buffer ourselves from the effect, for now, but not the poor and the powerless.

And it's the quintessential poor and powerless figure of a widow who we encounter in this story along with her child and because of the drought, they are dying of starvation. "Go to Sidon and there find a widow who will take care of you," is what God says to exiled Elijah and Elijah is like, "wait Sidon is the very heart of the Phoenician world where Ahab has put a bounty on my head! You want me to go there?" And God after dealing with the likes of Abraham, Moses, Jacob and other patriarchs isn't surprised by being second guessed though we can imagine God's patience has grown rather thin by this time, "yes, to a widow in Sidon. Must I repeat myself, Elijah?"

Elijah goes and finds the widow at the gate of the city and asks her for a cup of water and then asks her to bring him some bread as well. The widow, this poor marginalized woman who is fighting for her own life and her son's life in a famine, looks at Elijah and resists. She's like "are you kidding me, man?! All I have left for myself and my child is a handful of flour and smudge of oil. You caught me as I was going home to make what little I have left for us and then we are going to die!" Imagining the state of a desperate mother like that, I would guess that line was delivered with a fair amount of exasperation, if despair had not overcome her.

The mother, the widow, she who was impoverished by her social standing and suffering the consequences of the sin of those who sat in halls of power, does not acquiesce to this man asking more of her... until Elijah tells her – "if you do this for me the Lord, the God of Israel will ensure that your jar of flour will not run out nor will your jug of oil run dry for the remainder of the drought." And she believes and turns for home and that's exactly what happens. Her's was an act of generosity and faith, cause she didn't know if what Elijah claimed could be trusted but she goes to make what little bread she has and out of that generosity she saves not only Elijah's life but her own and her child's, thanks to the fulfillment of God's promise. That handful of flour becomes an abundantly filled jar and the dregs of her oil becomes an overflowing jug. It's a beautiful story.

We as Christians believe that the Creator of this world and this Universe, has as one of her, his its essential qualities - generosity. We've come to understand that because Jesus, the revealer of God was profoundly generous. And we've come to believe it because the earth in all her abundance is a generous earth. And in the experiences of our own lives, there is just something essentially

generous about this existence, isn't there, even with all it's issues and pain and struggles, so much is gift?

Abundance and generosity is built into the very fibers of creation. Sparsity, scarcity, miserliness is largely something human derived, coming from human sin and is evidence of the way the world is not supposed to be. It's a world built and designed to run on abundance and graciousness and generosity. The opposite of those is some kind of twist or taint that's just not right and not meant to be. It's evidence of the fallen nature of this world or the unfinished nature of it.

So therefore our work is to lean into and align ourselves with that which is generous and abundant even... and maybe especially... when we least feel like it, when it seems most inappropriate, when we feel most like grabbing hold and hanging onto what is ours. But like the widow of Zarephath and the mother and child in Maggie's story book, who were generous despite their poverty, they align themselves with the generosity of existence and as a result they don't go and die but the generosity folds back onto them because it's the way the world is supposed to work.

So in that spirit, we want to give you here at our church during this stewardship season, the opportunity to give and be generous as a spiritual practice, as a way of aligning with the way the world is supposed to work and to get right into that natural flow of God's abundance. And so as we do every year we are asking you to consider what you might give to the life and work and wellbeing of this beloved community here in Winchester. If you pledge what you think you might be able to give in the coming year then we can develop a budget to allow us to do the ministries that we all so value, to sustain this community that we all so love.

But that's not all! This year's pledge drive is a double offering in this way, it's a dual threat to our tendency to get stuck in scarcity thinking. We want to ask you to consider what you might pledge and we also want, in honor of the widow of Zarephath, to invite you to make and offer a loaf of bread to someone in need to accompany your pledge. A pledge to the church and a loaf of bread to a friend, a financial gift to the church and a gift of bread to someone who could use it. I'm leading by example here. Tracy and I will make our annual pledge to the church and this past week I made a few loaves of bread. Polish Bobka from the recipe of Tracy's Polish grandmother, Eleanor, and I gave one to our neighbor, and another to my daughters and their friends in Cambridge and down at Wesleyan.

This way we are not only receiving into our church community financial commitments to sustain our church in the coming year but also sending out into our neighborhoods and communities expressions of abundance, love and care through loaves of bread. But, Will, you say, I don't make bread. I'm here to tell you that God will meet you in your kitchen with your good intention and you'll be amazed at what you can do. But I don't have time to make bread with everything else! It's amazing what that handful of time that you do have can produce when it's given towards generosity. But I just give weekly and when I can to the church, I don't know about pledging well, I invite you to experience the satisfaction and joy that comes back to you when you become a part of sustaining a community of faith like this one that places at the center of it's life – healing and goodness, compassion and care, faith and service, friendship and love. Join us in experiencing together what the offering of a handful of flour offered out of love to your own community and others beyond, contributes to making your own

heart full of gratitude. Gratitude and generosity. Generosity and gratitude. They are beautiful antidotes to what ails this world, Amen!