

In the name of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath is one of my favorite stories in the Old Testament. It takes place at the beginning of Elijah's ministry. He has declared that there will be a drought in the land, because the Lord is angry with the people – including King Ahab – who are worshipping Baal, the Canaanite god of life and rain. And the drought comes. God then tells Elijah to go out to a little stream near the Jordan to hide from King Ahab, who will be very angry with him for bringing the drought, and there God will take care of Elijah. In faith, the prophet goes out in the desert and lives for a while, drinking water from a previously dry creek and eating bread and meat that are brought to him twice a day by ravens. One has to believe that this experience would have sharpened Elijah's faith somewhat – living where water flows during a drought and being fed twice daily by wild birds of prey, all on the Word of God alone. In time, the stream dries up and the Lord tells Elijah to go to Zarephath to meet a widow who will feed him and give him drink. And off he goes. That's where we pick up the story this morning.

We don't know the name of the widow of Zarephath, but we do know a couple of important things. First, she is not a child of Israel. She lives in Samaria and refers to God as Elijah's God, thereby not identifying herself with the God of Israel. Second, we know that she is a widow – Bible code for a completely destitute woman.

She has no husband and no way to make a living. On top of that, there is a drought and nothing in the area is growing, so she can't even collect the 10% of the crops that God commands the people to leave in their fields for the widows and orphans to live on. She's flat broke; nothing coming in and no way to get more. Just when things can't get any worse for her, they do. Along comes Elijah, whom she has never seen nor heard of before, and he asks her to give him some of her precious water – and not just water, but he also wants her to bake bread for him.

The widow is much more polite to Elijah than most of us would have been. She gently tells him that there is not even enough for her and her son to eat; that she intends to bake the last of her supply and then she and her son will go off to die of starvation because everything is gone. Elijah tells her to have faith. “Don't be afraid,” he says. If you do what I ask, “the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” Faithfully she does as she is asked, and miraculously the promise is fulfilled.

There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus thought of this story as He and the disciples watched the widow go up to the Temple in Jerusalem. They had been watching all of the wealthy folks go up and make a big show of putting their money into the Temple treasury. When the poor widow came up, she put in two small, copper coins that the NRSV tells us were worth one penny. Jesus tells the disciples that her offering is worth more than all of the wealthy folks' offerings. They gave from abundance, whereas she gave all she had to live on.

Two widows – two different generations of believers – but they share one very important attribute: high risk giving. Both of the widows in these stories gave *recklessly* to God, to further the work of God in the world. Both gave EVERYTHING they had back to the God from whom all gifts come. After this story we never hear anything else about the widow with the two copper coins, but we certainly know what happened with widow of Zarephath, her food and water supply were exactly as much as she, her son and Elijah needed to live on until the drought was over. There is every reason to believe that the same thing happened to the widow in Mark's Gospel account; that God provided for her, just as she gave what she had to provide for God's work.

But so what? These are nice Bible stories. They're good mythological accounts that are meant to make people reflect on God's good gifts to us, right? Wrong. I believe that these two stories are very real. Real stories of real people whose lives were really touched by a very real God, simply because they had enough faith to give recklessly, over-abundantly and trust that God would somehow, miraculously provide for them. And God did just that.

These kinds of stories happen every day. We all know stories of people who have given over everything to God and have received amazing gifts in return. Most people chalk them up to luck or coincidence, but make no mistake, high risk giving – done joyfully, faithfully and without overriding ulterior motives – regularly results in amazing returns.

This is NOT the prosperity Gospel that you hear televangelists talking about. I don't mean to say that if you give your tithe to the church you'll receive a gold Rolls Royce out of nowhere. That is NOT what God has EVER promised us. God promises us our "daily bread," that which will sustain us as we carry on our way. But more importantly, God promises us the Kingdom of Heaven on earth if we will just trust God enough to give recklessly, dangerously to a God who loves us the same way.

When I entered seminary, I gave up my job as an assistant city attorney in Austin. Now assistant city attorneys don't make great money, but they make a heck of a lot more money than seminarians – or most priests do. While I worked part-time in seminary, the work – like day laborer work– was sporadic and didn't always pay well. As a result, there were often times where there seemed to be very little meal left in the Bedingfield family jar and not much oil either. But every time we got desperate – and I mean EVERY time we got desperate – someone would send us a little money out of the blue, or we would find a \$20.00 bill in the pocket of a coat we hadn't worn in a year, or someone would invite us over for dinner and send us home with the leftovers. You can call it luck if you like, but God calls it high risk giving of reckless love to God's children.

Donna gave everything she had in order for me to follow my call to ordained ministry. She gave up the income I had always earned, a house, a lifestyle, friends and extended family, and every bit of certainty that she knew. *That* is high risk

giving! In order for me to follow the call God had started me on, Donna trusted in me, but more importantly, in God, enough to give it all away. And in return for this high risk giving, God provided our daily bread. That's the way it works. Period. End of sentence.

Our stewardship campaign is headed into the home stretch now and hopefully we've all made our decisions regarding this year's pledge. Things are again – or should I say, still – extremely tight at our house. Medical bills and Donna's being underemployed ever since we arrived here have taken a toll on us. Increasingly, there are times when the money and the calendar don't match up very well. But again this year, we are tithing my income and for the first time, we're tithing Donna's income as well. It's reckless giving I know, for people whose income is what ours is, to pledge \$4,000/year to the church . When payday seems a long way off and there's not much left in the checkbook, it seems incredibly reckless. But that's the way God is. God engaged in the ultimate high risk giving when he gave His only Son to suffer on the cross, so that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. All God asks in return is that we give – everything we have; recklessly, joyously and with the same love God shows us.

Amen.