

WGUMC October 14, 2012 "Wise Widows"
I Kings 17:1-16; Mark 12:41-44

Boy I'm glad to see some rain. Hope it keeps coming. I grew up in drought-prone Montana, so Elijah's story in I Kings hits close to home. Bad King Ahab was letting the people go after other gods. So the God of Israel sent Elijah to tell him that not only would there be no rain, there wouldn't even be dew on the ground until God said so. Then the Lord sent Elijah to the Wadi Cherith, to wait out the drought. There everything went along fine until the wadi dried out.

That's life, isn't it? There's a drought, a recession, a divorce, a mid-life crisis, a layoff, a cancer diagnosis. And our pool of resources works for a while. But as time goes on, we may discover that what used to work for us, isn't working anymore. The drought drags on. The old watering holes dry up. What are we going to do?

The same thing happens in churches, too. I gave you some numbers last week. I told you how the membership of

this church went from over 1,000 members forty years ago to just over 300 today. Given the fact that the membership numbers were inflated in 1970, that pastors didn't clean the rolls back then, it's still a precipitous decline. Someone might say that for Willow Glen, the wadi has dried up. What are we going to do?

Well, what does Elijah do? He could blame God. After all, God sent him there in the first place. And, even though God sent bread and meat morning and evening, the wadi still dried up. It dried up because there was no rain, and there was no rain because God was punishing the people for their idolatry. So, it is all God's fault!

But the prophet doesn't get mad at God. Instead, he gets moving. When the wadi dries up, God sends him someplace else. The Lord says, "Change of plans. Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there." So Elijah goes with the flow. But wait a minute. Sidon? They worship other gods in Sidon.

King Ahab's evil wife, Jezebel, came from Sidon. That's foreign territory. That's heathen country. Why does God send Elijah there?

No matter how bad it is here, we always think it's going to be worse there, don't we? Better the misery we know. But Elijah knows he can't stay here. And he trusts God enough to go there. So, he goes to Zarephath in Sidon. There he finds a poor, starving widow at the gate of the town, collecting fuel for her last fire. And he has the gall to ask her for a drink and some bread. But the prophet who takes her last bit of food brings her a lasting blessing. While he lives with her and her household, her jar of meal is never emptied, her jug of oil never fails.

In the church, we're standing in the wadi, and it's drying up. What used to work forty years ago, doesn't work now. What are we going to do? Stay here or go there? If you look at our goals for 2013, you'll see that we are making plans to go

to Zarephath, into foreign territory. We used to call it evangelism. But the "e" word got too scary for us, so today, we call it outreach. Frankly, I don't care what we call it, as long as we do it. You see, God has already chosen people for us, just like God chose that widow for Elijah, and it's our job to go there and be a blessing for them. Now, taking their last meal and moving in with them may not be the tack we want to take today. For sharing God's blessing in Silicon Valley, there is a better way.

But at first, we say "no way." We are not unlike the widow in Sidon when she first meets Elijah. What? You want me to give you my last bite of bread? I have a fire to build. I have a family to feed. I have a funeral to plan. You see, the widow has been suffering a lot—the death of her husband, now the drought—and she is operating with a scarcity mentality. She doesn't have the time. She doesn't have the resources. She

doesn't have the strength to care for this inconvenient stranger.

We're a lot like her. We've been through a lot in the past five years: housing bubbles, bank failures, financial stresses, job changes, family tragedies, health crises. Many of us are living with a scarcity mentality. We're stressed out and burned out, and on our bad days, we're convinced that we don't have a blessed ounce of energy to be a blessing to someone else.

You'll notice that Elijah doesn't listen to the widow's complaint. He knows that it's just her fear talking. So he says, "Do not be afraid...For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: 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."

You have a jar of meal. You have a jug of oil. You have resources for living. You have some gifts for giving. So, do you let your faith or your fear do the talking? The miracle in this story is not the jar of meal or the jug of oil. The miracle is that

the widow decides to put her trust in this man of God and take him into her home. She recognizes that her current situation isn't working so well. Her wadi has dried up. Her jar of meal is about used up. Clearly, it's time to give it up. So she gives everything she has to the man of God. And God makes sure that she has everything she needs.

Trusting in the providence of God. I think that is the special wisdom of widows. Believe me, it's hard-won. When you lose a partner and a provider, you have to turn to God to provide. Without trust, you wouldn't survive.

So, the story about the widow in Mark's Gospel should come as no surprise. Jesus is watching people bring offerings into the temple. He sees the rich but in lots of money. Then he sees a poor widow put in two copper coins. And he knows which gift is bigger. The rich gave a very small percentage of their total wealth. But the poor widow gave everything she had, two coins, worth about a penny. You see, she didn't have

enough money to trust it to solve her problems. She had to trust God and that made it possible for her to give her money away.

Our kids will be raiding their penny banks to participate in a penny race in the coming weeks. They may well give a larger percentage of their wealth than their parents who pledge to the church. And they can do so because they trust that their parents will provide for them what they need. The hardest part of growing up is transferring that trust from earthly parents to our heavenly one. After all, God doesn't carry a credit card. God doesn't have a bank account. And so the hardest lesson to learn is that if we give it all to God (our heart and soul, muscle and money) God will give us all we need.

I knew a wise widow in Eugene. She had not only lost her husband to a heart attack, but she lost her only son in Vietnam. She didn't have a lot to give, but she gave her all. She volunteered at the church, and she also worked at a Christian

credit counseling service four days a week as an unpaid office administrator. She well knew how hard it was to trust God and manage your money, so she wanted to help teach others.

Whether we have a bit of meal like the widow in Zarephath or two copper coins like the widow in Mark or some time on our hands and some hard-won wisdom like the widow in Eugene, we have a gift to give and God has chosen us to give it. But we can feed others only if we ourselves have tasted the Bread of Life. We can quench their thirst only if we have drunk deep of the Living Water. We can share with them the Good News only if we have heard it and believe it and live it. And we can give everything we have only if we have trust that God is everything we need.

Let us pray.

God of All, you have given us everything we have and you are everything we need. You are worthy of a greater love than we can ever give, but by your grace, let us be the gift that you would have us give. Let us be your presence wherever love is absent. Let us offer compassion to someone who suffers oppression. Let us bring your light to one who sits in darkness. Let us work your hope in one who needs your healing. Let us share your blessing with one who goes wanting. Let us by your grace to one who needs forgiving. For even a small thing is great when it gives you the glory. And if you would ask of us a big thing, if you would ask of us ALL that we have and ALL that we are, give us the grace to do this for you. In the name of the one who gave more than we can ever know, we pray. Amen.