

23rd Sunday after Pentecost Proper 27b

I Kings 17:8-16

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12:38-44

November 12, 2006

Open my mouth to speak Your Word, Open our ears to hear Your Word, Embolden our lives to live Your Word. Amen.

Children's Sermon is the Parable, Fable, Legend, Story of the Warm Fuzzies. Need to share the story briefly with the 8:30 service, complete with "fuzzies". Stuff some in my pockets.

Okay, you kibitzers and eavesdroppers—hey! I know you were listening. We all know, you, me, and the kids, that you big people in the pews pay every bit as much, maybe even more, attention to the stories told to the short people than you do to what follows! Hmmmmm! That's not permission, nor even an invitation to stop paying attention. After all, there must be a reason that Jesus taught largely in story or parable. The more we hear those stories, the more we listen, the more we discern. It's amazing how different the same parable can sound to different people or at different times, or at different stages in our lives. Maybe that's why we deal with the same lessons every three years. Maybe that's why we read the Bible every day.

I suspect you could tell me the basic gist of that parable I just shared with the children – anyone want to try? Yep! Well, we'll get back to that shortly – just stay tuned in.

Well, what's say we go back and look at the other stories, parables, we heard this morning – and we heard at least two others – in some ways more, but I'm going to focus on two: the somewhat parallel tales of two widows. First widow is in 1st Kings – a Sidionite woman – not a one of the Chosen people, but a most likely a worshipper of Baal – the second widow is, no doubt, a member of the Temple. Like most of the widows and orphans in the ancient Middle East these two widows are destitute, the poorest of the poor. They are essentially non-entities in that society. They have no power or influence, they have no means of subsistence, yet funny how God chooses just such folk to be our heroes. One of the things that got Jesus in the most trouble was his insistence on lifting up the poor and the outcasts, to reaching out to the marginalized, to women, to gentiles, to the widows and orphans – those, who for what ever reason, were considered to be unacceptable to those elites who yielded the power.

Back to 1st Kings. It is in this 17th chapter of 1st Kings that we meet the prophet Elijah for the very first time. Now you all know that Elijah is seen in the New Testament as a forerunner of Jesus. Both implicitly and explicitly Elijah's ministry is seen as a model for the ministry of Jesus. If you read the entire 17th chapter you will encounter two other miracle stories – before this

morning's story there is the story of how Elijah was fed by the ravens, they bring him bread and meat in the morning and in the afternoon, and he drinks from the Wadi, until drought dries it up. Then we come upon today's story. After that is the raising of the widow's son from the dead by Elijah. The underlying connective tissue joining these three stories we can see in the one read today. The literary theme is two fold: First and the most primary theme is that LIFE is made possible by the Lord God alone, there is none to equal the Lord God, and the second is the importance and power of the WORD, meaning the word of the Lord as spoken through the prophets.

So, there has been a terrible drought in Zarephath of Sidon, a relatively prosperous Phoenician commercial capital, deep in the heart of Baal territory. So when the Wadi dries up God tells Elijah to go there and a widow will feed you. He goes, finds the widow gathering sticks and asks for water, she obliges and while doing so Elijah asks for a morsel of bread. She stops short, saying I have no bread baked and only enough meal and oil to make bread for my son and me. Then we shall die. Elijah pushes the point, suggests she think bigger, yeah, that she do that, but FIRST she bake and bring him a little cake of it, assuring her that "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."

What would you do? Would you trust this foreigner? This one with a different God? Just because some prophet tells you there will be sufficient. AFTER ALL YOU HAVE A CHILD to feed, and aside from that you are on the verge of starvation yourself. Would you be willing to give out of your need? Well, she took the risk, she gave the last of her meal and oil to make that morsel of bread for Elijah, and what happened? You heard it: "she as well as he, Elijah, AND her household ate for many days. The meal didn't run out, the oil did not fail! There was plenty for all. Kind of reminds me of those 6 impromptu dessert picnics where 5 fish and 7 loaves managed to feed anywhere from 4 to 5000 men, not to mention the women and children, AND THERE WERE LEFT OVERS!

Whoa, kind of sounds like the warm fuzzies doesn't. Remember that as long as they were willing to give warm fuzzies, there always plenty of warm fuzzies to go around. It was only when the wicked witch entered with the thought that they MIGHT run out of warm fuzzies if they just kept giving them away, sharing them with others that the concept of hoarding and greed for them began to enter the equation. It was the fear of not having enough, of running out, of distrust, and suspicion that turned into the cold pricklies that gave comfort to NOONE. It only produced more discomfort, fear, distrust, protectiveness, self seeking, and strife, even to warfare.

This all came out of a sense of need to protect what one has, because one might just run out of fuzzies, bread, oil (to eat or to use it for fuel, matters not), money, clothes, gadgets, power, you name what ever... Think about it, isn't this really what happens when we become anxious about ourselves and failed to move out in faith. We've encountered this story since the very beginning of creation – think about the Israelites in the dessert trying to hoard the manna, contrary to God's instruction, it rotted, it molded and it was useless to everyone.

Well, what about that other widow? The one in the gospel. She, too, gave of her all, the last penny: "She in her poverty, who needs so much, has given away everything, her whole living". It was the smallest gift and yet it accorded the greatest honor and praise from Jesus. The story of the Widow's mite is familiar to us all, the phrase "widow's mite" has meaning all be itself in general parlance and society. You're going to hear a bit more about that later in the service, I'll leave that to Warren. Instead let us look at the question: So what does all of this have to say to me? After all, I have lots of flour, food is spoiling, growing hair as we speak in the back of my refrigerator, and I have far too many pennies, they aren't good for anything, not even a gumball anymore, just a irritant in change, adding weight to my pockets!

Hmmmmmm. Maybe it says a lot – remember the warm fuzzies, as we hoard and conserve our blessings that have ALL been freely given to us by God, what happens? Would the widow have had enough meal had she chosen NOT to feed Elijah first? She had a good reason, a child to feed. But I don't think so. The second widow would certainly have had at least a penny had she not so recklessly tossed it into the collection basket in the temple. Hey, it was minimal next to what the Scribes had given, yet it showed her faith, her commitment, her gratitude and praise for God, from whom all blessings flow! And that put the Scribes to shame for they gave out of their abundance, while she gave out of her need. Remember what happened when that trusting child came into the beautiful valley, and not knowing any better began to share her warm fuzzies with those around her. She knew in her heart of hearts, that God would provide what was needed. It became contagious, just like the hoarding had become contagious, but this contagion came with much joy and peace.

So what about Trinity church? I keep reading and hearing about the money problems, the budget woes, the desire to hang on to what we have, to hoard. The need to close buildings, are we hiding our gifts, our warm fuzzies, back where they can do no one any good? If so how can we expect to grow and to flourish as Christ's body in this place? So close to the center of Janesville, and of Rock County?

You guessed it, this is Stewardship time, and here is this arrogant guest preacher taking us to task. But I am going to take a moment to make sure that my point gets across. Even to go so far as to risk making us all squirm a bit. Maybe I can say what Fr. Bob can't. My hope in doing this is that I can get us to think that the meal will not run out, nor will the oil. That the pennies will become magic, hang on tight and we won't have any, but share and we'll all have plenty! Yes, let's free up those warm fuzzies and spread them around!! Stop our squabbling and hoarding and give as it has been given unto us! Just as the widow was to feed Elijah first, we all need to return to God first, off the top, of the best and finest – read the rules on tithing in the Torah. If I sit down and calculate my food, medical care, traveling expenses, my ever increasing hunger for newer more up-to-date cell phone packages, Cable subscriptions, wireless, ever faster and faster internet hookups. And then look at what's left for God's work, I would have very little to left. BUT if I set aside a portion, a percentage, maybe a tithe, maybe not, but say even 2% or 3% and figured that out FIRST. After all it is all only "a trust oh Lord from thee". It is ONLY out of God's generosity that I have life and all I need. So in gratitude I return a portion to the Source of my bounty. There will be enough for all that I really need. Just as the meal & the oil did not run out, just as there was sufficient bread and fish in the dessert, just as there was sufficient manna, and just as the warm fuzzies continued to grow and flourish WHEN, and ONLY WHEN shared!

Let us remember that the story in 1st Kings is about a widow who lives out side the borders of Israel, who worships a foreign God, thus a gentile. Yes, Elijah, a man of God went to a foreign land and sought out the foreign woman who worshipped a foreign God, Baal, and yet she is still the recipient of God's miraculous provision. She is the prototype of all the other gentile women who receive God's grace through their encounters with Jesus. God's universal love reaches beyond the boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, gender, orientation, and, yes, even religious affiliation. Warm Fuzzies are abundant, let us live and give, love and share like we not only belief in it, but are totally committed to it – I heard of a Kamikaze pilot who flew 43 different missions in World War II, he believed in what he was doing, but was he committed to it? Hmmm? Are we willing to honestly sing the -----hymn, for the first service that's Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to thee.

I leave you all with Warm Fuzzies to share. Throw out fuzzies.