

## ***“The Lord Will Provide”***

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, June 9, 2013  
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

### **Holy Scriptures: 1 Kings 17: 8-24**

8Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”

10So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” 11As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”

12But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”

13Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. 14For 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.”

15She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. 16The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

17After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him.

18She then said to Elijah, “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to

remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!”

19But he said to her, “Give me your son.”

He took him from her bosom, carried him up into the upper chamber where he was lodging, and laid him on his own bed.

20He cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?”

21Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried out to the Lord, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.”

22The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived.23Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and gave him to his mother; then Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.”

24So the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

### **The Lord will provide.**

When scarcity and generosity meet, grace abounds.

We are richly blessed with the story in First Kings  
about Elijah and the widow and her son.

The prophet Elijah was hungry and wandering during a  
terrific drought and famine

when he arrived at the home of a widow and her son  
at the village gate.

Even though they had very little to spare,  
a place was made for him.

The widow and her son’s act of hospitality and generosity  
resulted in God’s blessing their home

with a boundless supply of what all three would need to live.  
That is why when unexpected company arrives we “set a place for Elijah.”

I started out as a city.  
My family lived in Spanish Harlem in New York.  
We were intimately acquainted with scarcity and generosity,  
experiencing both in our own home and our community.  
So our family of six set a seventh place at the dinner table for Elijah,  
and invariably the extra seat and plate and silverware would be used.  
We never worried about portions; there was always enough.  
No one ever left the table hungry,  
and if our dinner helpings were somewhat smaller than the night before,  
the lively conversation more than made up for the lack of seconds.

Elijah, I can testify, has many faces, names, needs and hopes.  
One from Tennessee happily graced our table most every night

as he conducted a law internship in NYC.  
The year was 1973, and that summer the price of beef skyrocketed.  
Throughout that hot summer  
we ate chicken in all its glorious and varied forms.  
Towards August our soft-spoken guest smiled and said in his Memphis accent,  
*“Mrs. Calvert, this morning on the way to work  
I noticed something tingling on my back.  
I felt behind my shoulders and you know what I found?  
Little wings! Little wings were sprouting!”*

Mrs. Calvert understood perfectly well what the young prophet was saying,  
and for the next few days poultry was stricken from the menu.

In our homes and in our churches and in our community gatherings

“set a place for Elijah” runs parallel to “the Lord will provide.”

Yes, the Lord does provide, even and especially when entertaining angels unaware.

Our collective claiming of Elijah has its genesis in a command to serve an outsider.

Listen for the Word of God:

*8Then the word of the Lord came to [Elijah], saying,*

*9“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there;*

*for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.”*

*10So he set out and went to Zarephath.*

*When he came to the gate of the town,  
a widow was there gathering sticks;*

*he called to her and said,*

*“Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.”*

*11As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said,*

*“Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.”*

*12But she said,*

*“As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked,  
only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug;*

*I am now gathering a couple of sticks,*

*so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son,  
that we may eat it, and die.”*

The Lord told Elijah that the widow would feed him because she had been commanded to.  
Hmmmm... how did that work out?  
Even though she may have gotten the Word from God she went ahead and made other plans,  
plans that did not involve a wandering prophet.  
In her we can see every mother, every parent who has suffered, scrimped and saved to feed her children, denying herself for the sake of her beloved.

We can relate to her pain when she said to Elijah,  
*“Buster, I don’t need another mouth to feed. I have had it up to here.  
As a matter of fact, there is just enough food and oil left for our last supper.”*

With all due respect, Elijah does come across as insensitive to her suffering.

Do you think he felt he needed to push past her initial “no” in order to get to God’s “yes”?

We teach our young people that “no” means “no”,  
and we need to respect one another’s power and need to say so

when they choose to not participate in any act.  
However, this is a positive example of one person of faith gently, persuasively, faithfully pushing through and past

another soul’s fear, hesitancy and insecurity to get to trust.

Elijah could have said, well, if you need to have your last supper, I’ll move on.

Instead he rolled the dice and overcame her objections.

His affirmation of the widow tipped the scale;  
    he showed her that he trusted in the Lord to provide  
this one meal,  
    and to trust that there would be one more.

This would be the end of the story and the end of the sermon  
    if she had not generously shared out of her scarcity.

The widow looked at this crazy man of God, and she made a  
spot decision.

*I wonder if she had to talk herself into it.*

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is  
    to talk ourselves out of things than into them?  
We are so good at making excuses  
    about why we should not serve or share,  
    why we can't sanction or sacrifice for another  
    soul.

Truth be known, we can justify anything  
    when it comes to hoarding or holding out or holding  
on to our stuff.

If she had not fed this wandering alien in her midst with  
such grace,

    Passover Seders in Jewish homes and synagogues  
    would never open the door to let in Elijah.

Jesus of Nazareth would not have been almost thrown off a  
cliff

    by his hometown congregation  
    if he did not have the witness of Elijah and the  
widow

    to point to as an example of Christian  
hospitality to foriegners.

Later on, when Jesus Christ asked his followers who they  
believed he was,

they would not have equated his hospitable nature  
and the loving nurture of God with the prophet  
Elijah.

When you and I talk about amazing acts of kindness and  
mercy  
in the 10,000 year history of humanity,  
this living example of generosity in the midst of  
scarcity would be absent,  
and we would be the lesser for it.

The Good News is that we have this good news!  
God saw her suffering and that of her son,  
and God had compassion on them.  
God sent to her a persistent and persuasive follower,  
and Elijah had compassion for them.  
God gave to her the gift of a son and the will to survive,  
and she had compassion for those in need in her  
midst.  
The widow's trust in the Lord to provide  
moved mountains and moved God.  
She put aside her anger, her fear, her loss, her despair,  
and she took on God's gift of trust.  
She trusted that the Lord would provide.  
Praise God, the Lord provided indeed!

She offered this odd stranger at the gate her last supper,  
offering a portion of all that she and her son had left.  
Is there ever a good time to be hard hearted? Stingy? Tight  
fisted?  
Or so conceited as to think that the world revolves around  
you,  
or owes you something, or entitles you to more?

Trust that the Lord will provide.

The Lord does not promise excess or extravagance.  
Be satisfied with a sense of enough.  
Recognize that you may be the one the Lord needs to use to provide.  
If there is anything the Lord is really good at,  
    it is using people for holy purposes.  
The Lord may need you to be the one  
    to help provide hospitality, a bite to eat, a kind word,  
    a smile, a gift of hope and charity.  
You may become a small part of a grace-filled church, a God movement,  
    a mighty mission making a way in the desert  
    for the lost and the afraid, the seeker and the disinherited.  
Trust that the Lord will support what the Lord wills to be.  
Trust that you may be commanded – yes, commanded! – to play a part.  
Trust that the core of our response  
    is God’s gift of the capacity to empathize.

### Empathy

The Lord will provide empathy for the whole people of God.

You may have read the New Yorker magazine article by Paul Bloom (1)

that ran a few weeks ago. In it Bloom said:

In 2008, Karina Encarnacion, an eight year-old girl from Missouri,

    wrote to President-elect Barack Obama with some advice

    about what kind of dog he should get for his daughters.

She also suggested that he enforce recycling and ban



unnecessary wars.

Obama wrote to thank her, and offered some advice of his own:

"If you don't already know what it means,

I want you to look up the word 'empathy' in the dictionary.

I believe we don't have enough empathy in our world today,

and it is up to your generation to change that."

This wasn't the first time Obama had spoken up for empathy.

Two years earlier, in a commencement address at Xavier University,

he discussed the importance of being able "to see the world

through the eyes of those who are different from us—

the child who's hungry,

the steelworker who's been laid off,

the family who lost the entire life

they built together

when the storm came to town."

He went on, "When you think like this—

when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern

and empathize with the plight of others,

whether they are close friends or

distant strangers—

it becomes harder not to act,  
harder not to help."

The word "empathy"—a rendering of the German *Einfühlung*, "feeling into"—  
is only a century old, but people have been  
interested for a long time  
in the moral implications of feeling our way  
into the lives of others.

In this sense, empathy is an instinctive mirroring of  
others' experience.

The psychologist C. Daniel Batson calls this "the  
empathy-altruism hypothesis."

Batson has found that simply instructing his subjects  
to take another's perspective  
made them more caring and more likely to  
help.

In 1949, Kathy Fiscus, a three-year-old girl,  
fell into a well in San Marino, California,  
and the entire nation was captivated by  
concern.

Four decades later, America was transfixed by the plight  
of Jessica McClure

—Baby Jessica—

the 18-month-old who fell into a narrow well  
in Texas, in October, '87,  
triggering a 58-hour rescue operation.

President Ronald Reagan remarked,

“Everybody in America became godmothers and  
godfathers of Jessica  
while this was going on.”

The immense power of empathy has been demonstrated  
again and again.

It's why, in the wake of widely reported tragedies and  
disasters

—the tsunami of 2004, Hurricane Katrina the year  
after,

or [Hurricane] Sandy last year—

people gave time, money, and even  
blood.

*Our collective empathy releases ...a widespread sense of  
grief*

*and an intense  
desire to help.*

Last month, of course, saw a similar outpouring of  
support

for the victims of the Boston Marathon bombing.

*Surely the Lord has provided the gift of empathy and  
compassion.*

*Is there anyone here whose plight we should ignore?*

*Do you believe that we are called to provide for one another  
whether family or neighbors, strangers or aliens in  
our midst.*

Why do people respond to these misfortunes and not to others?

The key to engaging empathy

is what has been called "the identifiable victim effect."

As the economist Thomas Schelling,

writing forty-five years ago, mordantly observed,

"Let a six-year-old girl with brown hair

need thousands of dollars for an operation

that will prolong her life until Christmas,

and the post office will be swamped with nickels

and dimes to save her.

But let it be reported that without a sales tax

the hospital facilities of Massachusetts will deteriorate

and cause a barely perceptible increase in preventable deaths—

not many will drop a tear or reach for their checkbooks."

(Bloom, NYer, May 20, 2013)

Why is it that we care immensely for the small girl in the photo

gnawing on a crust of bread who has a distended belly and flies on her face?

We're so moved that we decide to commit \$35 a month to sponsor her and her orphan mates.

So then why is it that we routinely turn a deaf ear and a cold shoulder

to the plight of thousands of children who are having their last supper

because state & federal funding has been reduced or directed elsewhere

from school breakfast programs, Head Start, and health insurance?

Whom does society say it is okay for you to ignore?

Now imagine whom God is calling and commanding you to care for,

to minister unto, to welcome into your presence,

to ensure that their Last Supper is a new beginning.

The Gospel commands those who would follow Jesus to have empathy and compassion for one another.

Every social program, every fiscal policy,

every church and temple and mosque ministry

needs to be held up next to the measuring stick of whether it hurts or helps, harms or

heals

the widows, the children, and the Elijahs in our midst.

There are no nameless or faceless children of God.

Every plight and plea for mercy moves the heart of God.

The Lord dares to command anyone who would listen to provide,

and then to live into the trust

that one day the recipient may well become the

provider.

One day in the early 1950s  
my parents sent my eldest brothers David and  
Jonathan outside to play.  
We lived in one of a row of tenements in Spanish Harlem.  
There was a safe play area nearby,  
and our mother could watch from her window as the  
boys went down the street.  
David and Jon were around 5 and 4, respectively.

When they walked out the front door  
immediately a man on the street stopped and said,  
“*Let me take your picture.*”  
David and Jonathan had been taught to be wary and not take  
candy from strangers,  
so they shrank back, uncomfortable,  
and leaned into each other in the corner of the  
doorway on the stoop  
as he snapped away.

A short while later a poster was put up in churches and  
temples across the city.  
The poster featured two children in play clothes, with huge  
eyes and frightened looks,  
huddled together in a slum tenement doorway.  
Buffy and George Calvert were quite surprised when they  
saw the poster,  
and recognized their own children!

The poster read:     *These Children*  
                              *Need Your Help!*  
                              *Please Give!*

These days Jon laughs when he recalls  
that morning on the stoop and subsequent poster,

and he says, "*Hey, it's still true. Send money! I can put it to good use!*"

The Lord does provide.

We who have received a little or a lot have become God's providers.

May we trust that at the intersection of scarcity and generosity, grace abounds.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*

Endnotes

(1) The Baby in the Well: The case against empathy. By Paul Bloom, *The New Yorker Magazine*, May 20, 2013.