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Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 17:8-24

Susan Cooke Kittredge
Charlotte Congregational Church

If I'd Known You Were Coming, I Would Have Baked a Cake

This story about Elijah and the widow from Sidon is a rich legend of apparent simplicity and deep ambivalence. In preparing for each Sunday, I read several commentaries on the prescribed text in an effort to learn about the historical and contextual setting of the scripture. The scholars who write the commentaries also provide clues as to what the passage actually means. According to them, this section is about God's power to save, Elijah's role as a man of God, and the widow's faithfulness to God's commands.

That's just not what I saw when I first read it. What got me initially was the widow; she didn't seem especially faithful to me. On the contrary, she seemed bitter and hardened. There were enough inconsistencies to pique my curiosity, so instead of simply choosing another reading on which to preach, I stuck with this text.

One of the first things I discovered is that without a little geography and history we might miss some of the more important points of this story.

This is the beginning of Elijah's prophetic ministry, in the first half of the ninth century BC, and quite frankly it hasn't started off especially well. In Ancient Israel the monarchy was established and Kings were enthroned in the hope that they would work well with the prophets to affect public policy. No such luck with King Ahab and Elijah. You see, King Ahab married Jezebel and Jezebel was one powerful woman, as you may recall. She was a princess, the daughter of the Ethbaal, the king of Tyre, a small but very wealthy and influential kingdom on the seacoast of the Mediterranean, just north of Palestine. She was raised in the expectation of a great inheritance and a life of privilege. Like many a princess before and after, her future was, however, dictated by politics. She was married off to Ahab, the king of Israel, an upstart nation full of internal strife, unused to the rule of kings, a new and inimical cult dedicated to the worship of Jehovah. Jezebel,

an ardent worshipper of Baal, had to leave one of the oldest civilizations in the world to live in a foreign land. She went not gladly. Ahab was enthralled with this foreign princess, this dangerous, alluring, somewhat forbidden fruit, and he was willing to grant her many favors, not the least of which was to honor Baal the Canaanite storm god and not Jehovah the God of Israel.

Enter Elijah, the newly crowned prophet, whose first proclamation to Ahab is that of a three-year drought. He claims that it is not Baal—whom Ahab now worships—who controls the rain, but the God of Israel, Jehovah. Ahab is furious. Enter God who, seeing that Elijah is in danger, tells him to flee from Israel. Can't you just see God trying to put the words back in Elijah's mouth? Elijah, like a bull in a china shop, clearly needs a little work, a little tact, if he's to succeed in his new prophetic role. You don't just march up to the king, tell him his god is powerless, your god rules and calamity is at hand. So God quickly sends Elijah into hiding, first to a little stream east of the Jordan River, where he is fed by ravens, and from there God sends him to our widow.

Here's where the geography comes in. God doesn't send him to the friendly, welcoming widow down the street, to his next-door neighbor or cousin, aunt or uncle. God sends him deep into enemy territory, deep into Jezebel's homeland where Baal is worshipped with devotion. And it's not around the corner, by the way; it's a good 80 miles away. So when we hear this neat little passage that says, "God sent him to a widow in Zarephath," it behooves us to look at a map and realize that to save Elijah's life, God sent him into the enemy camp.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you, against all reason, felt that the only way to save your life, the only way to be really safe, might just be to go face to face with the thing or person that most threatens you? Instead of seeking shelter and protection from adversarial forces—be they personal, political, religious or economic—have you ever felt yourself called to hike on over to the other side? It is never easy; Elijah had to walk for days in the desert heat to get to his destination. By comparison, if we consider current modes of travel, where would we end up if we traveled for three or four days

from home? Going by air we might well find ourselves in Iran or North Korea seeking salvation.

Elijah's destination was just about as problematic and initially inhospitable. No spa awaited him, but a bitter and dejected widow who was getting ready to cook her last meal.

This woman bears a closer look. Remember that in those days a woman without a man, especially a widow, was at the bottom of the social ladder. With no man to define her, unable to work, she was forced to beg and scavenge for food. This is where Elijah finds her.

According to what God has told Elijah, the widow has been commanded to care for Elijah when he arrives. First of all, why would the widow listen to the God of Israel? This is not her god, Baal is her god. And yet, even though she has obviously been skeptical, she's not inclined to dismiss completely God's authority. Neither, however, is she going to trust that what Yahweh has said will really come to pass. She doesn't prepare for Elijah's arrival; in fact, when he does appear you can almost hear her muttering under her breath. Elijah, somewhat presumptuously I think, asks the poor widow to bring him some water and then, on second thought, he has the audacity to ask for the tiny morsel of meal she is clutching in her hand.

She explodes, as well she might. "For crying out loud," she says, "I have nothing and clearly never will. Leave me alone and let me just cook one last meal for my son so we can lie down and die." Or words to that effect. (Who, by the way, ever said the scriptures weren't laced with humor?) In perhaps the most prophetic moment of the story, Elijah then says what God, Jesus and prophets immemorial have said: "Do not be afraid. All will be well. Carry on about your business. But first bake me a cake. And then there will be oil and food for all until the rains come."

But first bake me a cake. It seems at once absurd, selfish, and demanding of Elijah to ask not just for food but for the effort and industry and creativity required to bake a cake. Some people love to bake, others do not. I fall in the first category; I routinely practice bake therapy. It's not just because I have healthy—or perhaps not—sweet tooth;

there is something about the actual baking that satisfies me. Until I lived with this story, I didn't really understand it though.

My relationship with baking started when I was very young and perhaps got its first seed from the fact that my mother—though a great cook—was not a baker and, in fact, eschewed sweets of any kind. Since she wouldn't buy the goodies my father and I desperately craved, I started putting together some basic ingredients easily found in the kitchen: butter, flour, eggs, sugar. Tah-dah! Pancakes or cakes! You don't have to have fancy ingredients to bake a cake; simple, everyday material works just fine.

My real launching into serious baking came at a time when I felt like the widow; I was down and out, smothered in the angst and struggles of adolescence. My particular symptom was insomnia. I found that one can only read so many tragic poems in the middle of the night so I turned to cookbooks. In the 1960s, some of you will recall, Julia Child was the culinary rage. So I read, from cover to cover, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. I soon found out, though, that the roast lamb and blanched haricots verts lovingly—or neurotically—prepared at 2 A.M. just don't hold well until breakfast when no one wants to eat them anyway. So I started baking cakes and found that after a little settling they were even better the next day. Some cakes I now intentionally bake several days before their scheduled unveiling just to give the flavors a chance to mingle and soak. When the cookbook called *The Cake Bible* was published in 1981, I thought, yes, someone understands me!

It isn't the food that ultimately draws me to baking; it's not the cakes, breads, cookies or pies that are in themselves the allure. I realize now it is the people for whom the creations are made. To bake is to live in the future, in the hope of something good to come, in the vision of shared bread and happiness and satisfaction, in the coming joy of giving something away.

Elijah sought to engage the widow, to ask this something extra of her, perhaps in the belief that she would lift her eyes from her downcast state to a future of promise.

We spend so much time clutching our meal in our fists, frightened that it might slip though our fingers—no matter how much we have, how much money or property or

time or love we are fortunate enough to possess. We live in such fear—some more overtly than others, some more consciously than others—that we don't see the potential of even the tiniest grains of meal to create something greater for others. Giving away the gummy mush from our sweaty palm is not a natural inclination. Especially if we feel we have precious little, we hold fast to what is ours.

One of Elijah's great legacies is hope. An extra seat is set at the Seder meal and many other times as well in the fervent belief that Elijah will come right before the Day of the Lord. Jesus identified John the Baptist with Elijah, the one who proclaims the coming Lord.

The quiet one in this story is God. God scurries Elijah away when he jumps into the lion's den of Ahab's rage; God fills the jugs with oil and keeps the food flowing just as Elijah had predicted. And in the second vignette about the widow's son being brought back to life—well, Elijah may have been the instrument, but God was the power. Though we may delve into the characters in this story, into Elijah and the widow, God is the main character, supporting, providing, protecting, bringing new life. This is what Elijah is trying to convey: his God, your God and mine, is a God of love and constancy, power and majesty. What he is proposing is that we live our lives as if we believed it were so, as if we trusted in God's power to redeem and resurrect us, no matter how stingy and bitter we become.

How might you hear Elijah speaking to you? What might he ask that you create, share, or give away? Remember also that the widow in this story cared for a foreigner, a stranger, a person of a different faith and belief. And conversely Elijah was saved by someone in a foreign land.

Bake a cake, whatever ingredients you use. You have what it takes. Perhaps you are not a baker but a builder; well then, build a cupboard for someone's future bounty or join the Habitat for Humanity work crew. If you're a musician, sing or play for someone who needs a song to lift a sorry spirit. Are you a nurse or a doctor? Give away the promise of healing, the art of reconstruction. If you are a lawyer, mix together two cups of mercy with one cup of justice and bake at 350 for 45 minutes. Teachers know best that

their trade is always one of proclaiming hope through knowledge and understanding. Artists' business is prophetic by nature; dance in hope, paint in hope and faith. If business is your kitchen, you are afforded the great opportunity to cast an ethic of hope and accountability rather than greed and selfishness. In politics we are all called to question how we live out our beliefs. If you are a farmer, touch the earth lightly, for therein lies the hope for future generations. Perhaps you are retired and feel you have few skills left and more time than you really know what to do with. Give away your time, to sit with someone who isn't feeling well, to read to small children, to teach someone how, in fact, to bake a cake.

The great preacher James Forbes, who retired a few years ago from Riverside Church in Manhattan, said he believed the coming decade to be "altar-call time" for United States and that the country faced a crossroads, he said in 2007 that this country will venture further down a path laden with "greed, pride, imperialistic domination" or embrace "a sense of truth, of sacrifice, the ideas of justice, equality and environmental responsibility." (*The Christian Century*. May 29, 2007. 10) Prophetic words, indeed.

No matter what you do in your life, the raw ingredients are at your fingertips. You don't need someone else to buy the fancy cake for you; you can make it yourself. You don't need someone else to save you; you are already saved. You don't need more than you have—in fact, you might just need less. You might need to open your clenched fist and let go whatever it is you are so desperately clinging to, be it money, or grief, resentment, anger, a child, a regret, a dream that might never come true. For we will never by our industry or material possessions save ourselves; we are already held in love and protected beyond our imagining. We can, however, change our lives by living as if we really believed this to be true; instead of hoarding and grabbing and clutching, we could bake cakes and live in gratitude for love shared and hope abounding; we could live and act as if we truly with all our hearts believed in the sure and steadfast love of God.

Amen.

