

June 6, 2010  
Proper 5C

1 Kings 17:8-24  
Psalm 146  
Luke 7:11-17

This morning's scripture passages are somewhat puzzling – full of inviting trails to explore. I want to lift up a few in general and invite you to think about them in the days ahead.

The first theme is that of miracles. It begins with the miracle of a small amount of food which, when shared sacrificially, never gives out. This is a story that is heard in many forms throughout the Ancient Mediterranean world – in Greek mythology, it is a pitcher of wine that never ceases to hold something for a hospitable elderly couple that entertain gods unawares.

Here it is a widow, apparently young, with a young son. She is a gentile in Sidon, who offers the last of what she has to keep body and soul together. Now, as a mother I find it odd that she's willing to sacrifice her *son's* last chance for survival, but maybe she figured that he would die without her anyway, so she lost nothing in giving away all she had.

God has told Elijah that he has commanded a widow to feed him – and it almost looks as if he's chosen the wrong one, or as if God has NOT told her. But in a stunning moment she offers up her last bit of comfort and the possibility of life itself to this stranger, this foreigner. That, my friends is grace in action – that is a miracle, alongside of which the jar of meal and pitcher of oil are nothing. And surprisingly enough, she doesn't consider them miraculous at all. When her son dies she accuses Elijah, "I *thought* you were a prophet, a man of God!" When he is raised back to life she says, "**Now** I know that you *are* a man who speaks for God."

What do we consider to be miracles? If I had a cookie jar that was always full whenever I reached inside – THAT would be a miracle! But we no longer consider the ability to get from here to Boston in less than an hour to be a miracle (at least at the right time of day) when it used to be a day's journey. We no longer think of the ability to live under water or to fly through the sky in machines to be a miracle. The ability to communicate instantly with someone half-way around the globe, to store food safely so it is instantly available all year long, to turn a valve and get clean, drinkable water **in** our homes were all once thought to be miracles (and still are in some parts of the world).

To have eradicated polio, small pox, whooping cough, diseases that killed thousands of infants and children; to have devised treatments and even cures for types of cancer and for diabetes, diseases that ravaged populations; the use of CPR and defibrillators to bring the dead back to life – are these not miracles? Does God speak through them, in them? If so, what is the message?

You know, prior to this story, Elijah has stood outside the Palace and cursed King Ahab. The king did not like this. And so Elijah has been hiding out in the desert, sustained by

ravens. And now he is depending for his survival on a gentile woman, who is ritually unclean to him. And it seems to me that we need to go back to the most basic miracle in this story – the bringing together of the Jewish holy man and the Phoenician widow; one an outlaw on the run, the other a non-person in the eyes of her culture. God brings them together in a tiny but powerfully life-giving community and creates possibilities for them to receive grace.

Certainly this story must have been in Jesus' mind when he saw that pitiful funeral cortege, for he acted without anyone asking him (or even recognizing him). But God's grace is unexpected, and we do not control it. It is given to whom God wills. Certainly Luke wants his readers to think of Elijah and to see Jesus as the one who bears God's grace and brings God's life to those who are beyond society's definition of people in need of care.

Psalm 146 is the psalm for the day today, and if you read it, you will see it provides the refrain for both of these passages, reminding us how often God's care for the widows and orphans, the ones no one was *required* to care for, is lifted up for believers as a standard of righteousness.

And it is that extraordinary, beyond the boundaries kind of care that builds community. Christ saves each one of us individually *so that we* may give ourselves to each other, for each other, in community.

That's why the Church exists. That's why the idea of the Trinity is so important. That's why the first thing condemned in scripture is aloneness. ("It is not good for '*adam*, the human being, to be alone." Because God is in community, God made us for community. Christ's sacrifice of himself made and makes our community possible and our community is only sustained when we follow him in that way. And when we do – miracles happen for those who have eyes to see them, hearts to hear them, and hearts that will rejoice.

The second theme that I want to think about this morning is that life is all about grace. Now it's okay to complain. The Psalms are full of the complaints of life: where are you God? Why do you let this happen? And it's okay to mourn, and to grieve our losses. There is nothing unfaithful in sorrow. Even Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. And it's okay to question. Why does God restore some and not others? Why does God grant some prayers, but not all? I don't know. Honestly, I don't believe anyone truly does, and if they give you some neat, pat answer, be very suspicious.

But I do believe that out of infinite love God works to give each one of us what we need for wholeness in the lives we are living. And if we will seek to live in wholeness – integrity, with singularity of focus – and to live in holiness – right relationships, following the example and teachings of Jesus in ALL parts of our lives – we will find that the Spirit breathes in and through us to bring us to peace and joy and life. Amen.