

1 Kings 17:8-16

“Then the word of the Lord came to him: 9 “Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food.” 10 So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, “Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?” 11 As she was going to get it, he called, “And bring me, please, a piece of bread.”

12 “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don’t have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

13 Elijah said to her, “Don’t be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. 14 For this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land.’”

15 She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. 16 For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the Lord spoken by Elijah.”

Dear children of our Heavenly Father

Moses was not interested. Jonah clearly wanted no part in it. The Lord God had come directly to both individuals with marching orders. He had a task in mind for each to carry out; a special opportunity to serve him. And both of them wanted absolutely nothing to do with it. In the case of Moses, God had in mind to send him as his representative before the Pharaoh of Egypt so that the Lord could deliver his people from slavery and usher them into the Promised Land. And even though Moses hid his face from God as he cowered near the burning bush, he could not hide his reluctance to fill the role God had in mind for him. His reluctant responses to God’s call to service were filled with more “buts” than an ash tray in a smoking lounge. “But this, but that, but, but, but... please send someone else, Lord!” (cf. Ex. 3 & 4).

Jonah most certainly did not fair any better. At least in Moses’ case, he stuck around and tried to renegotiate things with God. But Jonah wasn’t even interested in doing that. When God commanded Jonah to go and serve the people of Ninevah by calling them to repent, Jonah flat out ignored his command! Actually, what Jonah did was even worse – simply ignoring God’s command would have been one thing, but Jonah actually went out of his way not to listen to God and took off in an effort to get away from him, which of course is silliness to presume that a person can get away from or outrun God.

Moses and Jonah were two individuals who both thought they knew better than God did when it came to serving others. Our names should probably be added to that list right under their names, or better yet, maybe our names should even be above theirs. After all, we don’t have to think too hard about the times we’ve refused to serve God. In fact, some of our efforts might even put Moses and Jonah to shame!

God calls us to serve, but we're just not interested. It just doesn't seem like a good idea to us. We're just too busy. Someone else can do it. There are other things that are more important right now.

For example: As parents – we are to be the spiritual leaders of the family, more than anything else for our children, we're called to serve them by raising them up under the cross of Christ. That means letting the Word of God dwell in our homes richly. But how often do we forget our responsibilities as we expect the Church to do all the work through your sending your children to Sunday school or as you enroll them in our elementary school. Or we make the excuses why we don't have enough time to send them or to model God's love in our homes.

As Christians, we're all also called to make disciples by spreading the gospel, but in true Moses-like fashion we have our pat list of "buts" that we think excuse us from the Great Commission. As members of a congregation, we're called to serve God through offerings, but others will do it. There simply isn't enough left over each week to give anything to God. I'll let others serve him in that way.

Yes, we are Moses. We are Jonah. God calls us to serve in so many ways, through so many opportunities. Shame on us for thinking we know better than he does when and where we ought to serve. How pretentious of us; how arrogant to presume that we have a better idea than God himself of when and where and how we ought to serve. Adam and Eve thought they had a better idea of what to do with the fruit than God did. Look where it got them: sentenced to hell.

That was, until God overturned their sentence with his head-crushing promise of a Son who would fully deliver, a Son who would serve the way he was called to, with holy perfection and blessed innocence and righteousness. Jesus was no Moses. He was no Jonah. He was most certainly no you or me. And God be praised that he was not, for his perfect service in life and death was the only thing that could be rendered as a ransom payment for our redemption. Because Jesus' payment was accepted, we are free. Our selective serving has been forgiven and our hearts have been refreshed and renewed. Our hearts now beat for our Savior in gratitude and thanks, and we now celebrate by serving. So let us as God's forgiven family see what is truly behind his call to serve, by looking at the account before us this morning using the theme.

Sermon Theme: Serving or Being Served?

- 1. Who is doing the serving?**
- 2. Who is being served?**

As citizens of the United States, we have throughout our nation's history not shied away from exercising our First Amendment rights by complaining about the President when we feel he's doing a poor job. But one look at King Ahab will make the worst of our Presidents look angelic by comparison. Ahab **“did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those [kings] before him” (1 Kings 16:30)**. He set new lows in committing the most heinous of sins against God, so that the worst wickedness of the kings who had gone him would have been considered mild by his standards. It's less shocking then, that it was Ahab who ignored God's warning of a curse on anyone who would rebuild the city of Jericho, the city that God had destroyed with soldiers trampling and trumpets sounding (cf. Joshua 6:26). Yes, Ahab **“did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him” (1 Kings 16:33)**.

So God mocked Ahab and his gods who were supposedly responsible for supplying rain and causing things to grow and reproduce. He sent a severe famine for 3 ½ years. Elijah, God's prophet at the time, went to inform Ahab that this famine was the doing of the one true God. Then, after spending time in a ravine near the Jordan being miraculously fed by ravens, God called on Elijah to carry out a special mission; he called him to serve.

The Lord sent Elijah to a widow in a land which, ironically enough, happened to be the land from which Ahab's wicked wife Jezebel hailed: Sidon. God sent Elijah to the city of Zarephath, and even though God did not reveal all of the details to Elijah, he gave him clear enough direction, saying to him, **“Go at once to Zarephath of Sidon and stay there. I have commanded a widow in that place to supply you with food” (1 Kings 17:9)**. Once there, Elijah bumped into the widow at the town gate and asked her for a drink. Then, as she turned to fulfill his request, Elijah tacked on one more tiny request for a piece of bread. The problem, of course, was that for the widow, there was nothing tiny about the request at all. As it was, she had only enough for one more meal for herself and her son. The cupboards were quite literally bare – not the way we use the phrase today, which usually just means we don't see something we like. No, there was nothing; not another scrap of food to sustain this poor widow and her son. She fully expected that after this final meal she would die. So, knowing how little she had left, how would she respond to Elijah's insistence that before she follow through with her plans for her final meal, she first use what she has to make him some bread?

Surely to the widow Elijah's request was too much, humanly speaking. To put Elijah first when it meant the possibility that there wouldn't even be enough left for herself and her son??? At this point we're fully expecting the woman to tell Elijah to bug off and find his own food. But then Elijah attached a promise from the Lord God himself to his request. He said, **“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: ‘The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land’” (v.14)**.

It's been said that faith really becomes faith in God when human means fail. It was not reason, logic, or good old common sense that prompted the widow to go against her natural inclination to care for herself and her son first, and then this demanding guest, provided there was enough left over. No, faith in Elijah's God – that he would deliver on his promise of providing for her – that was what prompted her selfless act of service for God's prophet.

So with hearts of faith let us ask who was the one serving, and who was the one who was served? Was the widow the one serving Elijah and he was the one served by the bite of bread, or was Elijah the one serving and the widow was the one served by the gracious, providential promise of God? Ah... could it be both? Could it be that in serving each other, they were equally being served as well?

Here is the truth of the matter: when God calls on you to serve, so often it isn't just because he wants you to be the one serving, but also because he wants you to be the one served. God doesn't only bless those being served, but also the ones serving. Recognize then that with all the opportunities for service that God unrolls before our eyes like red carpets in every direction, he calls us to walk down those paths not just to bless others, but also to be blessed in return.

And surely you have experienced this. You have gotten over yourself, your complaining, your bitterness, your pathetic pity party when asked to serve in some way, any way really, and you recognized after the fact that you – to your shame – found yourself much more on the receiving end than on the giving

end. And truth be told, you should feel guilty. You should feel rotten about having made such a big deal out of a God-given opportunity to serve, when in the end you were really the one who benefited. You should feel downright awful.

Except that you know Jesus removed that guilt on the cross. You know that he forgave your sins of reluctance and aversion to serving him when he has called you to. You know that Christ's perfect record of service is the only one that the Father sees on your account. You know that his sacrifice has made you a saint.

As his saints, Christ's sacrifice has shifted our attitudes from selfishness to service. Yes, when we serve he is often serving us in the process, but it isn't that guaranteed return of blessing on our investment of service that leads us to serve. No, we serve because he first served us. Amen.