
The Jug of Oil

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 14 May 2023

1 Kings 17:7-16 • 1 Peter 3:13-22 • John 14:15-21



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

A very happy and blessed Mother's Day to all our mothers!

The lovely story from 1 Kings we started with today is suggested for Mother's Day. It's one of the great miracle stories from the Old Testament, and it involves the prophet Elijah. Elijah is an interesting figure. He is certainly a prophet, and talks to God; and he goes forward fearlessly, prophesying in the name of God to kings and others.

In our men's group this week we talked about compassion. A good working definition is love in action. We can show love to each other in many ways, including speech and physical contact. When we show compassion to another, we put our love into action. Think of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus speaks of the Samaritan who comes upon a man who has been beaten and left for dead. The Samaritan feels pity for the man, but does not leave it at that; he also treats the man's wounds and takes him to an inn to

recover, providing out of his own pocket for his needs. That is compassion. Out of his love and pity for the injured man, his actions naturally followed.

James speaks of compassion as well in his letter:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by deeds, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

Love expresses itself in actions. I am speaking about these things because today I wish to honour mothers. The mother loves her child. It is a natural love, born out of the physical love of a man and woman. Out of love, the mother brings the young life into the world. That love, at its best, lasts as long as the mother lives, no matter what happens to the child, or what the child becomes in later life. But the mother does not just bring love to the child. She also acts to provide for the child, often sacrificially. Stories abound throughout history of mothers who have given everything they had so that the child might eat and have shelter, might grow and prosper. That is true love, a Christ-like love, which gives of itself and does not put itself first, but gives all for the child.

This brings us back to Elijah, and this wonderful story from the First Book of Kings. It is a time of drought, and all in the land are suffering. Ahab is the king of Israel and Samaria, and Elijah prophesies to Ahab: “As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word” (1 Kings 17:1). God directs Elijah to journey to a place east of the Jordan River, where he will find a brook which is still running with water for him to drink. God also directs a couple of ravens to bring Elijah bread and meat twice a day. Elijah drank from the brook and ate what was provided him by the ravens. But then the brook dries up, and God directs Elijah to go to Zarephath, where he finds the widow. As we have heard, Elijah asks for a piece of bread, at which point the widow reveals that she has only a little flour and oil left — just enough for a final meal for her and he son.

See the love the widow has for her son! Even in her extremity of hunger she goes out to gather wood for a fire to cook something for him. I imagine she will give her son the larger portion. What she has, she shares with him.

Now, this is a story about a widow, and her son, and a prophet who saves them both. But there is a greater love here as well — God’s love for the woman and

her child. God directs Elijah to the place where he will find the woman. Later in the same chapter, the boy falls ill and dies, and Elijah brings him back to life. The woman's love for her son is an echo of God's love. We are formed in God's image, and surely a mother's love is from God.

I cannot relate any single personal story of great sacrifice of my own mother for me — nothing so dramatic as the Elijah story. Yet I believe that, in a very real sense, my mother gave her life for me and my brother and sister. All the many hours and days and months and years since we were born, right up to when she died almost two years ago, our mother cared for us and thought about us and loved us. That is in its own way a miracle of God's creating. My mother was 24 when my older brother was born, and almost 94 when she died — that's 70 years of love and care. I imagine many of you can say the same, and as mothers yourselves, have felt this way.

In the last year of her life, when Melissa and I were living in Nevada and my mother in California, and COVID kept us mostly apart, she went through a period where she called us every day. She was suffering from a form of dementia, but thanks be to God, she kept her good humour throughout, while her memory failed her. Every day she would call and say, "I haven't spoken to you in so long! I just wanted to know how you're doing." And we would talk about my work as a chaplain, and about our friends, whom she knew as well. And Melissa would sing old songs with her, Cole Porter and show tunes, because she had always been a singer. It was very much the same conversation every day, but she didn't know it, and her love for me was always fresh and ongoing. That love lasted right up to the end.

So, a very blessed Mother's Day to you all. I will remember and think about my mother, whose faith was known to her and God alone; but whose love I saw every day of my life. Gracious Lord, love flows from you, through us, and we live in your love, for which we give you thanks. Amen.