



## The Most Fascinating People: The Widow at Zarephath

*TEXT*  
*1 Kings 17:7–16*

August 9, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

In the fall of 2007, I worked with a church in the Seattle area as the high school director. The church there had a partnership with an organization called Agros, which works with rural villages in South America and Mexico who are living in poverty. The goal is to help families develop skills to work themselves out of generational poverty. And the policy of the church was that all staff should go visit the village we were partnering with. So a few weeks after I started, I was boarding a plane with about five other church members.

After a long couple of days of travel, we arrived in this village; and for the next week, we were simultaneously grateful, amazed, humbled ... and a little awkward.

To give you an example, when we were walking around the village one day, a woman invited us in to see her house. It was what I have come to know as typical in that kind of situation — a single room with very few essentials: small bed on the floor, a few plastic bowls and dishes that looked like they had been used longer than I was alive, and a roof that clearly was not going to keep water out of the house.

In the corner was a small makeshift stove. I came to learn this was one reason she had invited us into the house. Agros was teaching people how to install stoves like this one — made from cutting the top portion off of a steel drum and placing it into a small amount of concrete. Most importantly, it has a pipe off the top of it so smoke wouldn't gather inside the house — an issue that most of the village dealt with and that created, as you can imagine, a lot of health and lung problems.

As we made small talk in her house, the woman began to make tortillas on the stovetop, so we figured we should make our exit. She was clearly preparing lunch. But as we moved toward the door, she started to fuss at us; and with my weak Spanish skills, I caught her concern: We were leaving just as she was preparing lunch for us.

One of the first things we were taught when going through some training before the trip is what it means to accept a gift. If we showed up in the village to find they had killed their only chicken in order to feed us, our inclination would probably be to pay them

for the chicken. But to do that would be to negate the gift. If their intention is to bestow a gift of great value, we should not demean the gift by paying for it out of our pockets.

So here we were being served lunch by a woman with so little to live on that our meal would almost certainly mean she would be hungrier than usual that night.

To get something from someone who has so much is amazing; I don't want to argue that. But to be provided for when someone has so little manages to be that combination of heartbreaking, honoring and holy. And it is all the more meaningful when I think about how I tend to live in a world of perceived scarcity. I'm always worried if I have enough: enough time, enough money, enough patience, enough ability. There's always this sense of needing more of *something*.

When we meet Elijah in this narrative, there is such extreme drought and famine in the land that it has driven Elijah, by God's word, into a village where Elijah is a foreigner. And, also by God's command, Elijah is to look for a widow. Whenever you are reading Scripture, it is important to

know that widows simply are not well-resourced. They often couldn't own property and depended on the families of the late husband to provide for them. It appears that the widow in today's Scripture is left to fend for herself.

So Elijah shows up and she is, let's just say, not enthusiastic about feeding him. We can read her reply in a couple of different ways:<sup>1</sup>

(1) She is overstating her lack. Maybe she's thinking she doesn't want to give anything to this wandering prophet, so she says she doesn't have anything to give. Who among us has not given an air of not having enough as an excuse not to give? Who among us does not prefer to think we are just scraping along and surely don't have enough time, or money, or patience, or knowledge, or fill in the blank with whatever it is?

(2) Maybe she is exactly right. Maybe she is in such dire straits that she is doing the last thing she knows to do. She is about to eat the last bit of food she has, split between her and her son. After that, there is no plan; there are no contingencies. After she eats the last of this food, she is at the end of her options.

In either event, her reply is the same: "I have nothing, so I certainly don't have enough for you. I'm gathering sticks, so that I can cook one last bit of bread and die."

So God tells Elijah, "Go to Zarephath, for *I have commanded a widow there to feed*

*you.*" I don't know about you, but if I was Elijah, I would figure I must be talking to the wrong widow — because this widow didn't seem to get any texts or voicemails about feeding a foreign prophet. On an initial read of the story, I get kind of "judgy" about the widow. What's her deal? Why isn't she more willing to help? But the more I sit with it, the more I totally identify with her. She's in a tough situation. "Nothing" isn't a lot to work with.

But Elijah won't have it. You can hear almost a dismissive tone in his voice: "Yeah, OK. You can make that bread and then die — but first make me a cake, and then go do that other stuff."

We hear echoes of this story elsewhere in Scripture. There was the day Jesus was preaching to 5,000 people. Lunchtime was rolling around, and no one had ordered pizza. So the disciples, who kind of want all these people to go away, go to Jesus and are like, "We're in trouble. People are getting *hangry*." ("Hangry," if you don't know, is when you get so hungry that you are angry.) So Jesus asks, "What do you have?" And in Matthew's gospel, they reply, "Nothing."

And maybe that was the answer they thought would get them what they wanted: for all those people to go away and cease to be their responsibility.

But here's the issue with that: We have a God whose favorite material to work with is "nothing."<sup>2</sup> Out of nothing, God created the universe and

everything in it. From nothing, God puts flesh on dry bones; from nothing God puts life where none exists. From a childless old couple named Abram and Sarai, God made the father and mother of many nations. From a stutterer, God found the leader to get God's people out of Israel. And from nothing, God fed all 5,000 people in the crowd with Jesus that day — and had leftovers to boot.

So we have to imagine that when the widow says she has nothing baked, but that she has some meal and oil in a jar, our first thought should be, "Dang, who *knows* what God is going to do with all that!"

And that's what happens: God uses that little bit to sustain not just her and her son, but Elijah as well. To put it slightly differently: Through her little bit of nothing, she sustains herself, her family and a stranger. Maybe that's part of what makes God's grace and mercy so amazing.

I just finished reading a book by Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and writer in the Denver area. One of the things she talks about is how she was raised to think of God's grace as "being forgiven even though we sin." But now she sees it differently: *God's grace is a source of wholeness that makes up for my failings.*<sup>3</sup> *It is in and through that wholeness that I am made complete.*

In that sense, we are all the widow, with barely enough flour and oil to get by. Yet by God's grace, we live. It is

through God's grace that our brokenness, our lack, is not the last word; the small amount of flour is not all we have, nor does it determine the end of our story.

And that's kind of the whole point, isn't it? Because when it comes down to it, there are so many reasons (or just excuses?) I give for why I can't help this, or can't contribute to that. Or so many times I carry resentment because things don't turn out the way I want them to; I just don't have enough power or ability to make it happen. Or so many ways in life I feel like I'm just not enough. Have you ever felt that way?

I work with middle school and high school students a lot, and I'm convinced that one of the biggest struggles students face — and really probably all of us face — is feeling like they aren't enough. There are a ton of expectations for students: to have lots of friends, to be good students, to be good athletes, to be good musicians, to make good decisions — or just to have life figured out well enough not just to get by, but to excel at it. And to be honest, I think sometimes my job is to sit with them when they don't feel like they have enough in them to measure up and tell them what I know to be true: Our shortcomings do not limit God's work in us.

And I'd be foolish to think struggles like that are reserved only for adolescence.

A lot of you know I got married this past March. We leave tomorrow for our hon-

eymoon, by the way — and if I ever think it is a good idea to prep, pack and plan for a big trip in the same week I need to be writing a sermon, you should probably hit me upside the head. But anyway, getting married for the first time as a 36-year-old with, as the students here know, a list of dating relationships in my past that all, obviously until March, ended in breakups, you don't enter marriage without a fair amount of doubt — or at least a serious dose of reality, when it comes to my own relational shortcomings.

And I think for a long time I figured I would get married to the person who wasn't bothered by those weaknesses ... or who was even charmed by them.

But in truth, Meredith is perhaps the person *most* affected and subject to my shortcomings. If I'm impatient, she is likely to get some of that dumped on her. If I'm in a bad mood, or slow to get something done, or if I spend more than I should on a sweet pair of shoes, or if I'm too distracted to listen well — or any number of things where I just fall short — she isn't the person who's *not* affected by those things. And we aren't married because she *isn't* affected by those things.

She is *totally* affected by that stuff, and we are married because she has committed to stick with me, even when I inadvertently — or maybe very “advertantly” — throw that stuff at her.

In the best sense of it, as far as I can tell, it is because

of that commitment to me that I really want to be a better human being. But that isn't possible unless she is there to tell me that where I have only a little bit, it's enough. She'll work with that.

You see, when God decided to love us, it wasn't because we were ever enough. It wasn't because our issues don't affect God. They do. It also doesn't mean God is content with us as we are — because I do think we are seeking to change, to be made new.

But here's the good news: It also means we aren't defined by the limitations of who we are. We are not defined by *not* being enough. What we lack does not get the last word.

God didn't choose that widow because she had enough. God chose the widow because in her willingness — even if it was a stubborn willingness — God was able to transform what she had.

God choosing that widow speaks a message loud and clear: that no matter how little you have, and no matter how little you think you are, God is interested in using it and transforming it; God is interested in being at work in you and transforming you.

I have to imagine that the widow, when Elijah finally packed up and left to rent a room somewhere else, had some conflicted feelings about it. I'm sure it was a

relief not to have to care for this wild-eyed foreigner prophet. But surely she also had to think with no small amount of wonder at what happened while he was there. As the jars just kept providing, she must have thought, “What an amazing God this is.” What an incredible God who, when I see something as not enough, transforms it into an abundance.

And maybe instead of insisting on my lack; instead of listening to that voice that says what I don’t have, or I’m not enough, or I don’t have enough to share, or whatever it is in your life or my life on any given day; instead of being constrained by it, maybe I should instead be saying, “What an amazing God this is. How incredible that, with so little, God plans so much.”

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>*Daily Bible Study Series*,  
A. Graeme Auld

<sup>2</sup>Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Pastrix*

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 49–50

**This sermon was delivered at  
Village Presbyterian Church,  
6641 Mission Road, Prairie  
Village, KS 66208.**

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