

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost*

June 9, 2013

Rev. Marsha M. Vollkommer

Two stories...two destitute widows...acts of compassion...two acts of raising the dead...God's boundless love poured out...fear and amazement all around.

Were you amazed? I'm not asking for a show of hands, so you can feel free to be glaringly honest with yourself...Were you amazed – truly amazed – or maybe it was more the thought that here, yet again, is a nice story about what Jesus did back in the day. Maybe you had to be there...if we were actually to witness something like that, it might be different. I am afraid not a whole lot of anything amazes us these days.

So, do we say fine. Those were some lovely stories. Maybe even inspirational. We remember hearing them – or something much like them – before. Goodness...I stood here and preached on these very stories just three years ago. (I won't ask how amazed you were then!) We could just let them go altogether, I suppose. Get on with the prayers. Move on to the Eucharist.

But this begs a larger question, I think. And I am going to ask it...*Why do we come to church?*

If you were each asked to take a 3x5 card and write down, right now, why you come to church, I am fairly certain there would be as many answers as there are people here gathered. And that is a good thing – it is what makes us deep and rich and multi-faceted in our communion with one another. But I would also suggest that whatever we want from church, we are also charged to bring something. We are called to this place, once –or twice – a week, to participate in this thing we call worship. We are called to be active – to give as well as receive – to do just what participate means...*to take part*.

We are called to gather together in our common prayer – the prayers of the people, the Lord's Prayer, the confession, the Eucharistic prayer, the Psalm, the hymns – all are prayers in which we join our voices as one to God. We are called to The Table – invited by God – to participate in God's gift of remembrance and renewal – to promise and dedicate ourselves once again to the work of God's kingdom on earth. And we are called to participate in – to be active – in the reading and the preaching of the Word. We are called to take part in these stories that we hear...whether we are amazed or not. We are asked to work...to give and not just to receive.

How many times have you heard it said after a Sunday service...well, that didn't really speak to me...or...I certainly wasn't fed this morning. Perhaps that is so, because too often we show up with the notion that our presence is the only thing we

are expected to offer. The scripture passages, the proclamation of the Gospel, and – yes – the sermon are all someone else’s work to do. Here we are...hungry...feed us.

Here’s the thing. When we sit down at the table to satisfy our hunger, we pick up our knife and our fork and we participate – we take part – in the process. So I say let’s pick up our knives and forks and answer the call to participate in the Word this morning.

Let’s acknowledge that there is more here than some miracle stories meant to awe us with the knowledge that Elijah and Jesus could bring the dead back to life. Let’s move past dismissing these occasions as something that was fine for the time but has no application for us now. Let’s roll up our sleeves and work a little to see what these stories have to say to us.

The similarities between 1 Kings and the Luke passage are glaring. Both Elijah and Jesus are called prophets. Both accounts find their energy when a child is brought back from death. The first widow is promised a never-ending supply of grain and oil, and we know that Jesus will supply all of God’s people with a never-ending source of life in his own body and blood. When Jesus gives the young man back to his mother, the people say, “God has looked favorably on God’s people.” Words that echo the Magnificat and the Song of Simeon. Elijah tells the widow that the Lord God of Israel will not let her jar of meal go empty or her jug of oil fail. God looks with favor. God looks with love. God looks with unfailing care on God’s people. Today, in the reading, those people are widows.

God looks with favor...God cares...God loves. These are not startling revelations to us. But today’s stories show us, *yet again*, that so often God does not do these things alone. God uses God’s people to bring the message of love and care to others. A connection – a connection between heaven and earth. Jesus and Elijah are a connection between God and God’s people. They do not perform miracles for their own glory. Their actions glorify God. And their actions express God’s loving kindness. Their actions bring God’s kingdom right down to the dusty road outside of Nain and the drought-stricken land of Zaraphath - to two women who, without their sons, will become society’s outcasts. Two women who, through the lens of compassion, were the recipients of God’s boundless love and became the stories of that love that have lived down through the ages. That live on here, today, in this place...that we might participate in the hearing and knowing of them...that we might work together in order to be fed.

The Holy Scripture does not come to us to be simply a guidebook for successful living. Yet it stands rich and full of the call to live a Godly life. The invitation to participate with God in God’s kingdom. The call to proclaim God’s reign and be the connection – the conduit – of God’s grace between heaven and earth. As the Rev. Susanna Metz once said, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if people would see us – us! – as being a connection between God and them? They should. Because one of the many lessons we might learn from both these Scripture passages is that what Jesus and

Elijah did, we must do also. We'll probably not literally raise people from the dead, but we are called to be conduits of God's grace, and we are called to be prophetic.

Being prophetic doesn't mean we have to be dramatic. We are prophetic when we are aware of the needs in the world around us and we speak the truth about it. Let me say that one more time...we are prophetic when we are aware of the needs in the world around us – aware – and we speak the truth about it. The power of prophesy is in the truth of the words and the challenge those words offer people to change – and to bring about change – for the better.

Being a prophet is not easy...it is work! We know that prophets often get in trouble...John the Baptist lost his head. Jesus was crucified. Bishop Oscar Romero was assassinated at the altar of the church in El Salvador where he served as an advocate for social justice only 25 years ago. So....not something expected of us, right? Ah, but it is.

Each one of us is called to speak God's word of truth in a difficult world. There are prophets all around us in the world today. Each one of us has our own times to be prophetic. We each have our own vocations...and the ways we are called to be prophetic are equally as unique. Like any of the prophets, all we are asked is to take our connection to God **seriously**.

Elijah did – he didn't work magic or miracles simply because God had charged him to be fed by a woman who had no food. He saw need, and he spoke God's love into the widow's life. Jesus did – he did not raise from the dead a man who would eventually die again, simply because he could. He saw a widow who lived, but whose life was over with the death of her son. He looked with the eyes and heart of compassion and spoke God's love into her need. God will work wonders through each of us if we are open. God's word of truth can be in each of our mouths. God will work...in us and with us and through us...if we accept the invitation to work – really work – as well.

In the words of our Presiding Bishop, found in the silent meditation on the front page of the bulletin..."God's intent for a restored creation becomes possible when compassion and justice have been put to work. I believe that each and every person sitting here – and every person who communicates faith – is capable of changing the world. Somewhere, somehow, each one of us has the capacity to tame the chaos around us and turn it toward the peace of shalom." Conduits of God's grace...

Yesterday some of us traveled to Chicago to attend the conclusion of the 2012 Diocesan Convention. We were blessed to represent each and every one of you in voting – unanimously in favor, I would add – on the historic reunification of the Diocese of Chicago and the Diocese of Quincy. In his sermon, Bishop Lee spoke eloquently of the difference between society and culture's economy and God's economy. The former, he said, work on models of scarcity because it is scarcity – or the perception of it – that generates value. But in God's economy there is always

more than enough; the supply is endless. Love and care, compassion and self-giving are utterly different kinds of resources whose value doesn't depend on their scarcity and how much we hoard them – quite the opposite: the more we throw them around, the more we spend them, the more precious and abundant they become.

Bishop Lee invited us all to join with our brothers and sisters in Quincy in learning to sow the seeds of God's love for this world with absolutely wild abandon. Church takes a lot of work, the Bishop said, but it is God's church, not ours and if we are willing to do the work, God works with us and in us and through us. He said, "Like Jesus let's give away our lives. Practice prodigal love. Pray for the grace to serve those in this world who are in the most need. Waste it all so that we might want for nothing."

I humbly and respectfully borrow for us today the Bishop's conclusion to his sermon yesterday. It spoke perfectly to his message, and I think it speaks perfectly to the work we have done here together this morning, and the work we are called to do. The words speak of how we may be champions of truth, conduits of grace, and practitioners of God's love for God's people. In the prayer attributed to Saint Francis...let us pray:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is discord, union;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is sadness, joy.
Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

* With humble appreciation for the writings of the Rt. Rev. Jeffrey D. Lee, Bishop of Chicago, and the Rev. Dr. Susanna Metz.