

“The Gifts & Grievs of Faith”

Third Sermon in the Six-Week Series: Hold On! – *Hold On - to Each Other!*

1 Kings 17:1-24

New Revised Standard Version

Today's text reminds me of the Sufi parable about a farmer and his son who lived in a poor village.

The farmer's only material possession, apart from his hut and the small piece of land he lived on, was a horse he had inherited from his father. One day, the horse ran away, leaving the farmer with no animal to work the land. His neighbors went to his house to express their sorrow for his loss. The farmer thanked them for their visit, but asked: *“How do you know that what happened was a misfortune?”*

Someone muttered to a friend: *“He obviously doesn't want to face facts, but let him think what he likes, after all, it's better than being sad about it.”*

A week later, the horse returned to its stable, but it wasn't alone; it brought with it a beautiful mare for company. The villagers were thrilled when they heard the news, for only then did they understand the

reply the man had given them, and they went back to the farmer's house to congratulate him on his good fortune: *“Instead of one horse, you've got two. Congratulations!”* they said.

“Many thanks for your visit and for your solidarity,” replied the farmer, *“But how do you know that what happened was a blessing?”*

The neighbors were rather put out and decided that the man must be going mad, and, as they left, they said: *“Doesn't he realize that the horse is a gift from God?”*

A month later, the farmer's son decided to break the mare in. However, the animal bucked wildly and threw the boy off its back; he fell awkwardly and severely broke his leg.

The neighbors returned to the farmer's house, bringing presents for the injured boy. The mayor of the village solemnly presented his

condolences to the father, saying how sad they all were about the accident and injury.

The farmer thanked them for their visit and for their kindness, but asked: *“How do you know that what happened was a misfortune?”*

These words left everyone dumbstruck, because they were all quite sure that the son’s accident was a real tragedy. As they left the farmer’s house, they said to each other: *“Now he’s really gone mad; his only son could be left permanently crippled, and he’s not sure whether the accident was a misfortune or not?!”*

A few months went by, and the country went to war with a neighboring country. The military leaders scoured the land looking for healthy young men to serve on the frontlines. When they reached the farmer’s village, they recruited all the young men, all except the farmer’s son, whose leg had not yet healed. Sadly, none of the young men came back alive from battle.

The farmer’s son eventually recovered from his injury, and the two horses produced foals that were all sold for a good price. The farmer went to visit his neighbors to console them and to help, since they had always shown him such solidarity. Whenever any of them complained, the farmer would gently say: *“How do you know that what happened was a misfortune?”* If someone was overjoyed about something, he would respectfully ask: *“How do you know that what happened was a blessing?”*

The people of the village finally came to understand what the farmer had been saying all along. They understood that something could be both a blessing and a misfortune at the same time, and that the meaning of life is not about judging or comparing or measuring one’s blessings or misfortunes – for those are always changing, but rather the meaning of life is being present with one another through all that happens, so that, no matter

what happens, we do not face it alone.¹

Likewise, our scripture today is about the co-existence of blessing and misfortune, gratitude and grief, provision and suffering. It's about the mutuality of care that we extend to one another, especially in times of crisis. Yet what makes this text subversive, and challenging, is that the people doing the sharing and caring for one another could not be more different than each another. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that on the cusp of one of the most divisive elections in living memory, the scripture reminds us that our care for one another is not limited to those who look like us or think like us or live like us or vote like us. This is not a story about friends caring for friends. It is a story about strangers, foreigners, people who do not understand one another - going way beyond their comfort zones and going way beyond all that they know to be true about how the world

works, to trust God and to care for one another anyway. And in holding on to each other, they find hope and longer life, even as they continue to endure hardship. They don't help each other escape suffering, they help each other endure through the suffering.

The background of this story is important. The kingdom of Israel is split in two parts at this point and this takes place in the Northern Kingdom, during King Ahab's reign. First Kings chapter sixteen verse 30 says: "*Ahab did more evil in the sight of the Lord, more to provoke the anger of God, than ALL the kings of Israel before him.*" So, yeah, not a great guy. And, right before today's text, King Ahab marries Jezebel, whose father was the King of Sidon, a region north of Israel in what is now Lebanon. Jezebel and her family were committed to the worship of Baal and Ahab embraced Jezebel's faith and started worshiping Baal too. Baal was

¹ Traditional Sufi parable, this version includes wording from Paulo Coelho's version from Jan. 30, 2008 as accessed on

<https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2008/01/30/daily-message-186/>.

the god of thunderstorms and fertility or fertile land.²

So into this scene, enter the prophet Elijah. It's the first time we meet him in the biblical text. And Elijah is sent to warn King Ahab that what he is doing will destroy the very heart and soul of Israel. Elijah announces that because of Ahab's evil behavior there will be a severe drought in the land. No thunderstorms, no rain, no fertile lands. It was a direct insult to the god of Baal.

So now that that's taken care of, God needs to take care of Elijah. Because he's gonna suffer in this drought too. So God directs Elijah to go to the Wadi Cherith. A wadi is a valley that fills with water during rainy seasons but has no new source of water flowing to it. So when the water is gone, it's gone. And this wadi was 30 miles east of the Jordan River; Elijah's on the outskirts of his land. And here on the margins,

² Rolf Jacobson, Craig R. Koester, and Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Podcast #423 - God's Care for the Widow," *I Love to Tell the Story* (24 Oct. 2020), accessed on Oct. 30, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1311.

God provides. Elijah has water right in front of him, and he has food – from the ravens. Ravens are considered “unclean” because they feed as scavengers eating dead things; they are among the birds that God forbids the people of Israel to eat as stated in Leviticus 11:15 and Deuteronomy 14:4.³ Some scholars say that “ravens” could be a euphemism or slang for the Bedouin people of the desert,⁴ who were nomadic shepherds, and they were considered outcasts because of their Arab descent and their scavenging way of living, but also, ironically, they were known – and are known even still to this day – for their hospitality to strangers.

Whether the “ravens” were birds or Bedouins, the point is that Elijah is forced to rely on the hospitality of strangers, or strange creatures. But as grateful as he is and as great as it is, it doesn't last forever. The food and water run out. So,

³ Sara Koenig, “Commentary on 1 Kings 17:1-16 [17-24],” *Working Preacher* (30 Oct. 2016), accessed on Oct. 30, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4586.

⁴ Jacobson, Koester, and Schifferdecker, *ibid*.

God gives Elijah a new message. He's told to go to Zarephath which is in Sidon. If Elijah thought it was bad to be on the margins of his own country, now he had to go to a foreign land, to enemy territory, the very land of Jezebel's family!

But Elijah goes, trusting that God knows what God is doing, and as he was told, there's a widow there, who is also a mother. She and her son are so desperate that she tells Elijah that she's literally going home to make her final fire to eat a final bite of food before laying down to die beside her son. Given the desperation she must have felt, why would SHE listen to Elijah or even look his way when he spoke? And why would HE even dare ask her for her last morsel of food? But he does. The audacity of Elijah's faith and his trust in God is shocking.

Elijah tries to comfort her with the soothing words that are oft used in shocking biblical moments, "*Do not be afraid.*" He goes on to explain how if

she makes HIM a cake then she'll have even more flour and oil, and there will be enough food for all three of them. Not just for one meal, but until the drought is over. We don't know why the widow trusts Elijah or even why Elijah trusts the widow; honestly, it MUST have been the work of God's Spirit bringing them together to depend on one another, because there is no rational or cultural explanation for why this whole partnership works.

She saves his life, and in turn her own, and her son's. Strangers providing for strangers. Trusting something beyond themselves and beyond everything in their lived experience. This is the essence of faith, right? To take a risk that seems outlandish to the rest of the world but that somehow makes sense in the *kin-dom* of God.

Here we see the grief of the widow's desperation and the grief even of Elijah's need, met with a moment of shared gratitude and fulfillment.

With just enough for each day, Elijah and the widow survive the drought, but then, the unthinkable happens. With no reason or explanation given at all, the widow's son dies. She blames Elijah; wishing that she had just died WITH her son months ago rather than now having to go through the gut-wrenching trauma of watching her son die and being left to live in that grief by herself.

Elijah, too, is devastated. He takes the boy and goes up to a separate room and vents to God about how unfair this is, before laying his body on the boy, breathing life back into him. The widow's grief is met with the miracle we all long for when our loved one is sick – healing or even just another year or two. And she is grateful. She provided for Elijah and saved his life and now he has saved her son's life. It is a beautiful story of connection and how we truly must hold on to one another and care for one another. But it also kinda sounds like a commercial for karma too,

doesn't it? Do something good for someone and down the line that goodness will come back to you. But life doesn't work like that, does it? Life is not a tit for tat game where we can equal out all the good with all the bad. Rather, faith teaches us how to live through all the good and the bad – together.

Because of course, just like in our own lives when something good happens and we're holding our breath waiting for something to happen to mess it up, the widow's story doesn't end there; her son doesn't live forever. God's provision for the widow of bringing her son back to life is not ultimate. The boy will eventually die. He is human. You see, God's provisions—the water in the brook, the flour and oil, the gift of a few more years of life for this boy—they are all impermanent.⁵ None of them lasts forever. And yet, their impermanence does not negate their power and goodness. Rather these provisions, in the moment, are part of the difficult and joyful truth of our faith –

⁵ Koenig, *ibid.*

that gratitude and grief coexist together, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes consecutively, but never in competition or comparison with each another. Just as in the Sufi parable, misfortune and blessing are often hard to distinguish, especially at first, and they may in fact, go hand in hand.

One of the deepest truths of our faith is that we need each other. And the devastating realities of life is that we will lose each other. All of us will die, leaving friends and loved ones behind. Which means, all of us will grieve.

Losing someone we love is completely destabilizing. The deeper the connection we have with someone, the more they become a part of who we are and how we live, so much so, that when we lose them, we can feel untethered, unanchored. We have been holding on to someone, and they have been holding on to us. And then we are forced to let go. And in that letting go, we are lost.

The lost feeling comes from the loss of connection with another. To grieve is to be left empty handed and empty hearted. To grieve is to grasp for anything that might fill that emptiness only to realize that we cannot bring the one we love or the reality we once knew back. To grieve is be forced to let go and to live with that pain and that emptiness.

And. To grieve is to be transformed. Grief transforms us when we realize that the emptiness we are left with, can simultaneously be an openness to something new. Not a replacement for what we have lost, but a receiving of something new that without the loss we might not have had the opportunity to hold or receive. A new connection is made – maybe even to God, or to ourselves, or to others.

Our lives are laced with grief and gratitude, and faith and our beloved faith communities are what help us navigate through this delicate, repeating pattern of holding on and letting go and holding on again.

On All Saints' Day we practice and ritualize this truth of our faith. We grieve deeply the lives of these we have loved and lost, and we also give thanks for having been loved by them and having shared life with them.

If it is true that we need to hold on to each other here on earth to make it through life, to provide for one another, then it is equally true that we need to hold on to the saints that have gone on before us too. Because while we've had to let them go in body, we hold on to the faith they showed us, the wisdom they taught us, the love they gave us, the grace they extended to us. And in holding on to these gifts, what we realize is, we're really holding on to God, for we know God through these gifts of faith, wisdom, love, and grace that we give each other. That is the meaning of the incarnation. That is why Christ came to earth – to SHOW us who God is. And that is what WE are called to do while WE walk this

earth – to show each other who God is.

If we are to hold on to the call that Christ has given us to be his hands and feet in the world today, we MUST hold on to each other, and uplift each other, and provide for each other, and remember each other. There is no other way. And we wouldn't want it any other way, anyway, would we? Because in grief and in gratitude, life is fuller, living it together. Here and now, and in the hereafter.

Amen.