

“Risky Generosity”

I Kings 17:7-16

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“He would give the shirt off his back.” Have you heard this said about someone you know? I have and would imagine that you have, too. In all reality, though, do you know someone that generous? I’m not sure I do.

The widow at Zarephath comes close. She shared what she thought was her final meal with the prophet, Elijah. Her risky generosity overwhelms and inspires me. Let me share her story and see if it impacts you the same way.

Before doing so, may I be very candid with you. Nothing in my life enables me to relate to this widow’s plight, and quite frankly, I can’t even go there with my imagination. Our society is filled with safety nets. Even on reality television shows, no one starves to death or gets killed. This is not true everywhere with everybody, but it is with us. Make no mistake, though, this widow had no safe place to fall and no one in her life that would snatch her and her son from the jaws of death. If but for a few minutes, let’s try to see the world from her vantage point and discover what she can teach us about the mysteries of life and death.

In Elijah’s first appearance in the biblical record, he announced to King Ahab the coming of a drought, the consequence of the nation’s self-centered behavior under Ahab’s leadership. For security reasons, God led Elijah to the brook at Cherith where he was fed bread by a raven. When the brook dried up during the drought, Elijah went to Zarephath in Sidon where he encountered a widow that was preparing to cook a final meal. She had no more food and no hope of receiving any. As Heidi Neumark writes, “In a time of national crisis, this widow’s needs would be considered last, especially under the regime of the arrogant King Ahab.”

When Elijah met the widow, he asked for something to drink. Before she could bring it to him, he called to her and also asked for some bread to eat. This final request seemed to be too much. “As the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son that we might eat it and die.”

This puts a new spin on a “last supper,” doesn’t it? Can you imagine the emotional distress this widow was experiencing? To quote Neumark again, “I don’t imagine that she prepared her child’s last supper with dry eyes.”

Scripture says that she did as Elijah requested and as a result, she was blessed for her risky generosity. Her food supply did not run out as she feared it would.

What is the purpose of this story? What is the message we need to take with us today? For me it is this. **Giving is the basis of our faith.** Sharing with others is both a duty and a privilege, regardless of how much or little we have.

If there ever was a person that should have been discouraged from sharing or had a valid reason for not doing so, it was the widow from Zarephath. Her next meal was literally going to be her last. She was going to prepare it, eat it and await death with her son.

Surely no one would expect her to take food from her child and give it to a stranger. Is there anyone that would refuse to place limits on her generosity and tell her to ignore Elijah’s request? Wouldn’t we feel compelled to talk to Elijah and convince him to look elsewhere for food? Wouldn’t we appeal to God and urge Him to continue miraculously feeding Elijah? Sure we would, so this is all the more reason we need to figure out why this story is here and what it means for us.

Could it have to do with building community? **Giving is the basis of our faith because sharing builds community.** We really are our brother’s keeper.

Think about it. “Here is a woman about to die with her child, a mother unable to feed her little boy, who still manages to love her neighbor as herself,” writes Neumark. This is risky generosity. It is bold by any standard.

Have you ever been this bold and generous? Do you have a story to share that even comes close to matching this widow’s generosity?

Why would someone want to be this generous? In addition to making the world better, giving gives us new life. This widow and her son lived and survived the drought because they shared. If they had refused to divide what they thought was their last meal, I wonder what would have happened? Do you think they would have perished? It appears they would have.

Doesn’t this strike you as odd? This widow lived and spared her family because she was willing to give her life away. Seems I recall a holy man named Jesus that endorsed this radical idea.

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” Matthew 16:24-25. You recognize these words as the basis of our dream at Smoke Rise, “To give ourselves away.”

I know too many people that are slowly dying because they are not generous with their time, talents or resources. Life is about them and they are blessing themselves to death. There is something stifling about selfishness, isn’t there. On the other hand, nothing is more liberating and fulfilling than generosity.

Recently I was talking with a dear friend that is known for his generosity. He considers himself fortunate because he is able to give away millions each year. “You don’t know how much it thrills me to give. As a little boy I dreamed of making a lot of money so that I could help others. This is my passion and purpose.”

The happiest people I know are generous. They are filled with life and love as they look for ways to share their time, talents and resources with those in need. They make life enjoyable for those around them. At times, they make life possible like the widow at Zarephath did.

Does this describe you? Are you the kind of person that would give the shirt off your back or share the last food in your pantry? Do you respond to other’s needs with risky generosity or are you much more calculated and cautious? Think about it this week and ask God to reveal changes you need to make along with the confidence you need to make them.