

Bread of Life, Cup of Compassion a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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TEXT: 1 Kings 17:8-16 Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.' So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, 'Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.' As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, 'Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.' But she said, 'As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal 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 may eat it, and die.' Elijah said to her, 'Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.' She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah

Luke 7:11-17 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!' This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

MAJORA CARTER WAS BACK HOME - where she grew up - in the dirty, smelly, broken down, junk-strewn, asthma-producing wreck of a community called South Bronx. It is the single poorest congressional district in the US.

Majora had escaped it as early as she could. She had gotten herself a college education at Wesleyan University. She had gone into film-making. But things had broken down in her life. Having married too young, now with her marriage a thing of the past, with no money, no place to live, Majora was out of options. She moved back home, her life as much in ruins as the community to which she returned. Here she was, only 30 years old, and already, she was grieving the death of hopes and dreams.

How different was Majora Carter from the widow in Zarephath to whom God sent Elijah? She was a widow in a culture that did not value women except as the property of their fathers or husbands. When Elijah encountered her, this widow was planning to make her last meager meal of bread and water, and then die, along with her young son. She too was grieving the death of hopes and dreams. She acknowledged God, but in the story, she referred to Yahweh as Your God, no longer My God. And then Elijah began to speak.

Against all odds, this widow found hope in Elijah's presence. Since she was willing to trust him and feed him out of the last of their food, little of it as there was, God blessed her with flour and oil and water that never ran out. She received the Bread of Life. Tangible, chewable, real bread for nourishment; but the bread of faith and courage and trust and gratitude as well.

The prophet Elijah already knew something about Bread of Life before he reached the widow in Zarephath . Months before this story, an unknown Elijah is ordered by God to tell the rebellious King Ahab that there will be “neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.” Elijah obeys, confronting his king with the message designed to bring the monarch into line. In fear at the reaction, Elijah runs home, and in the middle of a fitful sleep, God tells him “Elijah, get up, Go. Trusting God’s wisdom without question, Elijah leaves. He stops near an almost-dry waterway, wondering how he is to survive in such a wilderness. But every morning and every evening, he hears a great whistling of wings and raucous calls, and ravens float down their wrinkled talons clutching bread and meat. Elijah must have remembered the manna in the wilderness.

God lured Elijah into courage, ordering him to scold a king who could order his death at any moment, and then God places him on a straight path into a desert. Wilderness lies just ahead in every life. We may be anguished by a loved one’s illness or our own, or stressed at work, or disappointed in our dreams or decision. We might face divorces and disillusionments and disasters. Elijah reminds us to trust that God will send the ravens, or their kin, with bread to give us strength. He paced and hides and sleeps and muttered to God. He needed God’s daily bread of courage and assurance as much as the physical nourishment.

When the stream finally dried up, Elijah is sent into Sidon. God instructs, "I have commanded a widow there to feed you" (1 Kings 17:9). The candid widow greets Elijah with the news that she and her son will have their one last bite before starvation claims them. What happened to her crushed dreams? Her reflexive if cranky hospitality saves her and she feeds him first. And he says there will be enough forever after, and there was. Hundreds of years later, Jesus took bread and offered it to 500 or more and he also said, there will be enough. And there was. Elijah stayed with her for three years.

There is strength in bread. Bread has its own language. “I love you. Welcome home. Be well, You are mine, remember me.” It speaks to us of love and memory and holiness. Love brings my friend Peggy to the door bearing soup and warm biscuits when she knows I am anxious. Love leads a member of my women’s group to ask how to make the cinnamon laced breads of Christmas although she is Jewish. I make apple bread for my grand boys, and they say; “You're the best” and my daughter Megan makes zucchini bread for Christmas gifts when she has no money. Cindy Cake makes homemade bread for our potlucks.

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care.

But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."

In the time of the widow, workers were often paid in bread. In Egypt, bread was placed in the tombs for use in the afterlife. It was unleavened bread that the Hebrews took with them in their rush to escape from slavery. 12 loaves of bread were later kept in the holy of holies of the Temple of Solomon. Later, as civilization began to grow, the ability to grow and store grain and make bread meant peace. Towns could be built, because food, grains, grown outside the walls, could feed many more people than were needed to procure it. And surplus meant stability. Bread of life is identity, memory, trust, courage, welcome, peace. Bread of life indeed.

In our Gospel story, we find another widow, a grieving mother. Again, how different was Majora Carter from this widow from Nain? Pall bearers were carrying out her son who had died. her only son! He was dead! Who could ever replace the loss to her heart? What would happen to her, now that he was no longer there to watch over her? Already on the lower rung of society –she slipped even lower. This final humiliation, the death of her only male offspring, would ensure her final cultural extinction. There was no place in her being for hopes and dreams any more.

The text says, Rabbi Jesus saw her. Amidst his own distractions and purpose, Jesus saw her – just as Jesus sees each of us, especially when we least expect. And Jesus had compassion. We can just imagine how lonely and lost she felt. The emptiness - the nothingness . . . When her son went limp in her arms –she must have lamented, "Who are we that you are aware of us? Who are we that you care for us?" Nobody - I am a nobody! God doesn't know who I am. God doesn't care for me! My son is dead. Then -- "Jesus saw her." Jesus was so deeply moved by her plight that he went to her and spoke to her - "Don't weep!" Imagine telling a grief stricken woman don't cry. But then Jesus moved to the coffin - touched it - and said, "Young man, get up!" And he did!

The Message tells us "the crowd realized they were in a place of holy mystery that God was at work among them. They were quietly worshipful – and then noisily grateful, calling out among themselves, 'God is back, looking to the needs of his people!'" Life meets death. Life prevails.

Remember Majora Carter? She was befriended by a local minister, He saw her, as he asked her to teach Sunday School. In the bread of life and cup of compassion, she gradually realized that she not the same woman who had left South Bronx . She had seen parts of the world most of her neighbors knew nothing about. She knew communities could look beautiful. So, with her arts and film-making background, and with just plain gumption, she began to clean things up in her neighborhood, and she cajoled and persuaded until others joined her. While there's still a long way to go, the South Bronx

hardly looks like the hell-hole to which Majora returned. The people where she lives have begun to hope, and to take more pride in their community, which has led to them taking more pride in themselves and their lifestyles. The clean-up has created new jobs and new visions for what can be. And Majora has found new life and new hope for herself. She now consults around the nation and around the world on environmental justice possibilities. Life met death. Life prevailed.

Bread is an instrument of community between people, the flavor of bread shared has no equal. And wine turns a meal into a feast; the fruit of the vine is a drink of celebration, Choose Life. Do not be afraid, do not weep

The communion ritual has power. It holds the strength of an enormous connected community, a family that stretches around the world and throughout the centuries. We don't want to be left out! The power of the Eucharist may simply be that of all sacred drama: the promise of change. In the mystery of our sacrament, the rituals transform not the bread, but the participants. We friends of Christ, who a meal with the Compassionate One, come to the table as widows, hungry, grieving, lost, powerless. But God gives life and Jesus brings power and compassion.

Bread of life, cup of compassion. Holy moments may be found at any time. The banquet is ready. There is always enough to go around. . .