

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Bread to Bring, Bread to Share”

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2 Kings 4:42-44

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We’re nearing the end of this series looking at the life and ministry of the prophet Elisha. We’ll wrap up at the end of this month, and I hope this has been a formative dive into a figure that perhaps doesn’t get so much air time in one’s regular Scripture reading. Our lens in looking at his life hasn’t just been, “What were the who, what, where, and when of Elisha?” That’s not the primary purpose, but rather our lens has been, what does Elisha’s life and ministry tell us about how God works in mission and in ministry?

This week, we go a little bit back in the story to a small miracle—or maybe I should just say miracle, since after all is there ever such a thing as a “small” miracle? It is at least a quickly told miracle, but one that tells us so much about the way God choose to work among us and through us. Let’s go to God’s Word together. 2 Kings 4:42-44:

A man came from Baal-shalishah bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord: They shall eat and have some left.” He set it before them; they ate and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, we praise you for this hopeful Word of provision and faithfulness, and we pray that you would instill us with trust that no matter how daunting the task, how impossible the mission, we would seek only to trust in you and entrust ourselves in your hands. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Did this story sound familiar at all? A large group of people gathered, needing food. A small, seemingly insignificant, even laughable amount of food (or at least insignificant in light of the present need) is offered up, but then somehow, at the prompting of a man of God, there’s not just enough, there are leftovers. Have you ever heard a story like this before?

We read one of them a moment ago. The feeding of the multitudes, reading from John’s version of it. A large crowd of thousands gathers in the wilderness to hear Christ’s teaching, but

it's getting late, with no food around. So at Jesus's prompting, they take stock of what's around, and all they have is a small boy's offering of five loaves and two fish. Christ blesses the food and tells the disciples to distribute it. They do, and miraculously, everyone eats their fill, and there are leftovers.

There are only a handful of stories that are included in all four Gospels. Some you might expect: his crucifixion, his resurrection. You kind of figure those would be in all four. But others that you think would be in all four aren't. Such as Christ's birth. Only talked about in two of the Gospels. Then of the handful that are in all four Gospels, some you wonder, why of all the things did *this* make the cut across the board?

The feeding of the multitudes is one of them. I mean sure it's a miracle. It's a powerful story. But do we consider the feeding of the multitudes in the same breath as his crucifixion and his resurrection? At least in terms of what to include and what not to, the Gospel writers seem to have thought so. Why do you think that is?

This story in 2 Kings seems to be hitting a lot of the same notes as that miraculous feeding in the wilderness by our Lord.

First thing to know is that there's a famine in the land. Tells us six verses earlier. Food is scarce. People are hungry.

So there's a famine going when this man comes to Elisha. That means, widespread, there's scarcity, there's hunger, there's need. There's more need than just this one man is possibly capable of addressing. Even shrink the scale down to what is facing him right then and there, a gathering of a hundred people, and their hunger, their need, and it's still overwhelming. So he says what any of us would say, "How can I set this before a hundred people?"

Think about what he was looking at. Not only would what he himself brought be laughable in the sight of feeding a hundred people, but it starts to feel even more pointless if he started to think, "Well, those same hundred people are going to be hungry again tomorrow, and then what about all the countless others who are impacted everyday because of this famine? Honestly, what difference could this possibly make?"

It can be easy to feel that way. You can talk about actual famine, you can talk about material poverty and scarcity more broadly, or you can talk about spiritual famine. Whatever the terms, the pressing need is overwhelming. Around the world, violent conflict and displacement in Ukraine and Gaza, higher frequencies of famines and floods, polarization, alienation, radicalization. You can even shrink the scale down to just what faces us here, today. In the face of the pressing needs of our city: homelessness, addiction, gun violence, domestic violence. You can even think of it in spiritual terms: entire generations crying out, hungry for God, and yet

increasingly distrustful of those who would claim to represent him, and not without good reason either.

In the face of all that, it's real easy to think, "Honestly, what difference could this possibly make?"

But notice that the man didn't come to Elisha hoping to feed a hundred people. He sure didn't come to Elisha thinking he would somehow fix a famine. What brought him there? Did you catch why? He was "bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God." He was bringing his first fruits.

Have you ever heard that term? First fruits? It pops up often enough in the Old Testament. It's connected to the practice of tithing, of dedicating a tenth of what you earn to the Lord. But "first fruits" specifically speaks of dedicating the *first* part of one's harvest to God, that is, before all the other claims upon one's earnings, before any of the many bites that inevitably start nibbling at things, there's the dedication to the Lord.

It means that the man didn't come to fix a famine. He came to be faithful first.

What does it look like to be faithful first when it comes to our resources? When it comes to giving? When it comes to generosity? Do we say to ourselves, "I'm going to give and dedicate to the Lord first, faithfully, joyfully, and sacrificially, before any other claims"? Some of you do, and it's a powerful thing. You've testified to me as much the impact it has had on your life, and you know who you are, and I thank God that you have been led to that place.

But then for others of us, how often do we say instead, "I'm going to give, but only out of what's leftover at the end"? Can you feel the difference? I mean, it's Stewardship Commitment Sunday, so you knew I was going to get into this, but can you feel the difference between a dedication to God that comes first and a dedication to God that comes out of what's leftover? You can see it right. Take an honest look. What does it convey about one's faith if we only give out of what's leftover, after all other things have had their claim?

It's why when we talk about pledging, of making an in-good-faith estimate and commitment toward the shared ministry of the church, on one hand, yes, we talk about it as a budgeting tool, to help our Session be good stewards of the church's resources and project expenses into the coming year, and that's helpful, don't get me wrong, but that is secondary. That is a distant second.

The primary reason we talk about something like pledging is a spiritual reason, because it's an invitation to approach something as practical as a household budget or how much you give as a spiritual exercise first, and what impact on our faith do you think it could have if we did as

the man coming to Elisha did: if we didn't bring our first fruits to try to fix a famine, but instead to be faithful first?

Now right now I know that there are some inevitably thinking, "Wait a minute, preacher. You're just trying to pad the church budget and pay your own salary while you're at it." And yeah, lo and behold, church staff are paid through the church budget. But I get it, and honestly, if I'm sitting where you're sitting, and someone like me said what I just said, the skeptical, cynical side of me would be thinking the exact same thing.

And that's why every year I say this, and this is something the Stewardship Team every year doesn't want me to say but I do it anyway. If the only thing holding you back from embracing the spiritual practice of generosity, of first fruits, of dedicating to God first rather than out of what's leftover, if the only thing holding you back is skepticism about me, then I have a challenge for you. In part this is me calling your bluff, but often there's another reason that's the real reason but it's easier just to dismiss the preacher.

But here's the challenge: first, let's talk. If you're skeptical about me and my motives, there's deeper stuff we need to unpack. But then, double what you give in a given year, and don't give it to this church. Give it to another ministry. Note I said another ministry, not just some random charity or the Athletic Department or club dues or something like that—those can be all well and good; just don't call it first fruits unto the Lord. Double what you dedicate to the Lord, and don't give it to this church. And then come talk to me again in a year, because I already know what you'll say. You will see first and foremost the impact that it will have on your faith, because you are dedicating to God out of first fruits, not out of what's leftover.

You'll notice the difference it makes in your own life. And that's huge. On a spiritual level, that's huge.

But the promise of this passage, and the promise of all those tellings in the Gospels of the feedings of the multitudes in the wilderness, is that it'll make a difference on a scale you couldn't imagine.

I was tempted to offer this sermon as an old-fashioned three-point sermon, and it still basically is, I just didn't present it as such at the onset. But you might consider the first point as famine, the need, the overwhelming need, and you might consider the second point as first fruits, of a response of faithfulness to God, and then here's the third one, keeping with the whole "f" alliteration thing: a feast.

What's the end result of this faithful offering? Was it, "Whew, we were able to add just enough water to the stew for it to stretch and at least get a little bit of food into everyone's belly"? No. "He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord." They

had some left. People had eaten what they wanted. And in a *famine*, they had some left. We hear the same from the Gospels of how many baskets were filled with leftover bread after the thousands had eaten their fill.

Think about it. What's the promise, and what goes into the preparations for something like Thanksgiving dinner? I know some of us may be thinking even now about the number of people that would be coming and who's bring what dish, and all that. So tell me, as you're going into preparations for it, are you charting out precisely how much protein each person should nutritionally get from the turkey at a given meal and then preparing only that much? Are you considering how much casserole x number of people might eat, and you know that one dish will go out, but then that other relative is bringing the other dish that honestly people never like that much but never had the heart to tell them, but you think, eh if folks are still hungry they can eat that and get their fill? If you're expecting fifteen people at the Thanksgiving table, are you going to slice up the pumpkin pie into fifteen small pieces, thinking, well, everyone will get a little bit at least? Is that how you're going about it? Now, maybe we could and should think in terms of portion control more often, including yours truly, but that's not the point of Thanksgiving dinner. That's not the promise of it.

The promise of this meal tucked away in the book of 2 Kings and the promise of the meal shared in the wilderness with Christ that every Gospel told us about is that a seemingly insignificant, even laughable offering, when given in faith, and entrusted to the Lord, can be put to miraculous work. This, it seems, is how God works.

So friends, consider how you come to the Lord, whether it's in offering, whether it's in pledging, or whether it's in your commitment and service in the shared ministry of the church, and know that whatever you bring, if given in faith, in the hands of our Savior, it will always be more than enough.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.