

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Elisha: Two Way Streets”

Dr. Jay Howell

2 Kings 4:8-37

October 15, 2023

Today we continue in our series looking at the life and ministry of Elisha, this farmer’s son who literally left the plow to follow another prophet, his master, his mentor Elijah. My hope is that as we go through his life, we won’t just learn about who Elisha was, but that we’ll catch glimpses of the ways God might be at work in mission, and what that has to teach us even today.

Last week, we found Elisha picking up his mentor’s literal mantle, as we also join in the mission of God which neither started with us nor will stop with us.

Today, as we come to one of Elisha’s miracles, we find him not in isolation, as we might be tempted to think miracles to happen. But rather in close relationship, and it makes all the difference. Let’s go to God’s Word together: **2 Kings:4:8-37**

One day Elisha was passing through Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to have a meal. So whenever he passed that way, he would stop there for a meal. She said to her husband, “Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God. Let us make a small roof chamber with walls and put there for him a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

One day when he came there, he went up to the chamber and lay down there. He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite woman.” When he had called her, she stood before him. He said to him, “Say to her: Since you have taken all this trouble for us, what may be done for you? Would you have a word spoken on your behalf to the king or to the commander of the army?” She answered, “I live among my own people.” He said, “What then may be done for her?” Gehazi answered, “Well, she has no son, and her husband is old.” He said, “Call her.” When he had called her, she stood at the door. He said, “At this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son.” She replied, “No, my lord, O man of God; do not deceive your servant.”

The woman conceived and bore a son at that season, in due time, as Elisha had declared to her. When the child was older, he went out one day to his father among the reapers. He complained to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father said to his servant, “Carry him to his mother.” He carried him and brought him to his mother; the child sat on her lap until noon, and he died. She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, closed the door on him, and left. Then she called to her husband and said, “Send me one of the servants and one of the donkeys, so that I may quickly go to the man of God and come back again.” He said, “Why go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She said, “It will be all right.” Then she saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Urge the animal on; do not hold back for me unless I tell you.” So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When the man of God saw her coming, he said to Gehazi his servant, “Look, there is the Shunammite woman; run at once to meet her and say to her: Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is the child all right?” She answered, “It is all right.” When she came to the man of God at the mountain,

she caught hold of his feet. Gehazi approached to push her away, but the man of God said, "Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me." Then she said, "Did I ask my lord for a son? Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?' " He said to Gehazi, "Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, give no greeting, and if anyone greets you, do not answer, and lay my staff on the face of the child." Then the mother of the child said, "As the LORD lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave without you." So he rose up and followed her. Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the face of the child, but there was no sound or sign of life. He came back to meet him and told him, "The child has not awakened."

When Elisha came into the house, he saw the child lying dead on his bed. So he went in and closed the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. Then he got up on the bed and lay upon the child, putting his mouth upon his mouth, his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands, and while he lay bent over him, the flesh of the child became warm. He got down, walked once to and fro in the room, then got up again and bent over him; the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes. Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, "Call the Shunammite woman." So he called her. When she came to him, he said, "Take your son." She came and fell at his feet, bowing to the ground; then she took her son and left.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who saves, God who restores, we pray for your restoration among us this day. May your healing presence be with us, for in your Son you declare not only that you are Lord, that you are Savior, but that you are with us always. Help us to hear your Word declaring this truth, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I'm kind of breaking a rule here not to dive into other passages when really the focus is something else, but I mean, when's the next time we're going to be talking about Elisha? But in one curious instance shortly before this passage, Elisha's going along his way when a number of youths from the city come out and start ridiculing him, "Go away, baldie!" they say. Elisha at that point calls down a curse in the name of the Lord, at which two bears come out of the woods and maul forty-two of the youths. Yes, that's in the Bible. So remember, as one goes into mission, whether as an officer, a leader, a teacher, working with any age but perhaps especially with children and youth, let's say you happen to have something of a receding hairline and are ever made fun of for it, just know that somewhere on the spectrum of biblical responses to it is to call bears down upon them. [Choir, I know y'all don't have the best view on most Sundays, but don't get any ideas.] But I digress.

Our focus today is on a powerful relationship that emerges between Elisha and a woman from the town of Shunam, not too far from Nazareth really.

One day Elisha could see a woman he knew quickly approaching him. She brushes past his servant, coming straight to the prophet, falling at his feet. Elisha doesn't even need to be told what's wrong at this point. Something horrible has happened to the woman's son. He had fallen sick suddenly and had died. First Elisha offers to send his servant to go to tend to her son, but she insists that it be he who comes directly. After all, the woman had come to him. They had a history.

And he was in a position to help. Elisha arrives at a room that looks all too familiar to him—he himself had slept there as a guest in this house many times. But there on the bed was the child lying lifeless. Elisha prays, touches the child’s mouth, eyes, and hand, and the child miraculously grows warm, sneezes, and rises back to life.

Years earlier, it had been Elisha passing through. He came to a town called Shunam, when a woman, presumably knowing who he was, invited him to share a meal with her and her husband. This went on for some time. A friendship emerged, and every time Elisha passed through there, he would stop for a meal. The friendship became so strong that the woman arranged with her husband, as they were of some means, to support this man in his ministry by adding a small, separate chamber to their home that would be for him to use whenever he passed through.

This continued, until one day when Elisha was staying there, he felt compelled to do something for his friend, and he and his servant realize that what this kind, generous woman had truly wanted, no doubt informed and grounded in the long relationship they had, was to be blessed with a son. Elisha makes this promise to her, and it comes to pass that this kind, generous woman gives birth to a child of her own.

Things take an unfortunate, tragic turn, when the child falls ill and dies, leading the mother to go looking to Elisha, and Elisha brings the child back to life. It’s a powerful story: of a mother’s faith, of this prophet’s faith, of God’s power to restore life. But what I find perhaps the most striking is that the story sees fit to tell all of this lead up to child’s restoration, all of this about the relationship between Elisha and this woman.

Think about it. If the main point was just that Elisha could bring this child back to life, then really the whole story about the meals and guest room and the years-long friendship between Elisha and this woman really wasn’t necessary. Elisha stops by a house, brings child back to life. And that’s it. No need to tell the rest of it. And yet, for some reason, we’re given this whole back story to how Elisha became close to this woman and her family, how their lives had become connected. Why is that? Relationship as a core component of mission is something that in practice can get overlooked, even forgotten.

Two Christian authors named Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett put out a book some years ago called *When Helping Hurts*. For some, myself included, it took a big poke at how the church, especially the church in North America, has approached the notion of mission and service. As the title would suggest, they claim the church can often do harm, even while trying to help. (It’s similar to other titles you might’ve heard of like *Toxic Charity* or even our friend Balajied Khylllep’s *Freeing Congregational Mission*.) Does the church actually do harm to those it claims to be trying to help?

They raise up, as a stereotypical example, giving away turkeys at Thanksgiving. Christians from a church in an affluent suburb go to a lower-income area of town and give away frozen turkeys the week before Thanksgiving. After distributing the turkeys, they say, “Well, see you next year!” and leave.

Or, that same church puts together a mission team to go to rural Kenya to help build a school house. They purchase flights, get visas, arrange transportation and lodging. The host organization more or less puts their usual operation on pause to host this group once they arrive. And once they’re there, they spend the whole week moving cinder blocks from point A to point B. All done with good intentions to help those in need of it. And all done, so this book would claim, in a way that actually harms those they intended to help. And you might flinch at that, “What harm? The turkeys were given. That’s generosity. The school house continued to be built. That’s service. How could that do harm?”

The harm, they say, is in the message it sends to those receiving the help. In both instances, the message is, “You just receive. You are being served. That’s your role here. We come. We give. You receive.” And the tragic result, even though it’s all done with good intentions, is that the agency and sense of dignity of those receiving help is stripped away, bit by bit, every time this happens.

It's a symptom, the book says, of a tragically material understanding of need, rather than a spiritual one. If we were to say that need or poverty was just a matter of material lack, lack of food, money, clothing, shelter, then the solution is simple: just provide food, money, clothing, and shelter. Problem solved. No more lack. No more need.

But is that the way it works? No. It’s deeper than that. There’s a brokenness in all of us, but for someone in a point of perpetual material need, there are mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects that are at work too. It means approaching that need involves approaching the whole person, and that means relationship; that means investment; that means saying your life has value as does mine, because God loves you. That means any kind of material provision of food, clothing, shelter, money takes place on the foundation of a relationship committing to the restoration of the whole person, as we ourselves seek restoration in the Lord.

If any of this is sounding familiar, you may have heard some of this from our friends at The Restoration House and Olive Tree Early Learning Academy. This line of thought is a big part of how they go about their mission.

“Wait a minute,” you might be thinking. “If your neighbor’s house is on fire, you don’t wait around to build a relationship; you help put the fire out.” And that’s true, they say, and they differentiate between three stages of need and help.

The first is Relief, or intervention. That's when the building's on fire, water's coming over the levee, missiles and bombs are going off and people are fleeing, and when that's happening, you just help.

The second is Rehabilitation. That's when the fire's been put out, but you start the work of sorting through the rubble and rebuilding. And when that happens, you help, but you do so while also caring for the whole person, restoring them. You don't just say, "You sit back while we rebuild your house," and not let them be part of the process at all.

The third is Development. That's when the house is rebuilt the way it was, but maybe it could use a more kept up lawn and landscaping. You don't just say, "You need landscaping, so we're going to show up unannounced and do landscaping for you," without any say so or agency from them.

And that all might make sense to think of it that way. Those categories aren't all that groundbreaking. The trouble, they say, is that when it comes to how the church approaches need, mission, service, we have a troubling tendency to apply Relief, that is, just showing up and helping, when really it's more a matter of Rehabilitation or Development. That's the turkeys at Thanksgiving. That's the school house on the other side of the world.

And without even realizing it, with good intentions, faithful Christians have done great harm in this way, shortchanging the importance of relationship, of being present with the whole person, and prioritizing the task at hand. I think that's why the Book of Kings gives us this back story between Elisha and this woman. It wasn't just a one-way street, of Elisha just serving and healing and nothing more. She showed generosity to him first. There was friendship there. There was relationship there. There was mutual concern for the whole person.

It's the same reason the model for mission given to us in Christ isn't just Jesus showing up and dying on a cross the next day. He lived, he walked among us, he invested life on life. This is the incarnation, literally embodying the gospel, a ministry of presence, of relationship, as well as of healing and provision, and as God sent Christ, so Christ sends us. This is how we are called to go out. The tragedy, the true tragedy, is when we consider service or mission as just some kind of transaction. We give; you receive. Nothing more.

I'm as guilty of this as anyone. One of the most formative places for me in faith was a rock quarry in Tijuana, Mexico. Throughout high school, my youth group would go there each year, fly into San Diego, rent a van, get food, go over the border into Mexico, and camp in this rock quarry. Then during the day, we would build these basic houses.

Incredibly powerful trips for me. They met me at hard times in my own life, and it was on these trips that some of the biggest steps of faith in Christ and realization of God's love and care

for me took place, all with the backdrop of camping with my youth group at night and building these houses during the day. And I got pretty good at it. I'm not claiming to be some master carpenter or anything, far from it. But as far as building this particular kind of house, I did it enough that I got pretty good at it. To the point that by the end of my years going on these trips, I was more or less running the build site. And I took pride in being good at it. I took pride in going there, and staying on task, and getting the job done.

Then on the last day of the last time I went, as we were about to leave, I was in the completed house by myself for a minute, when the little girl whose family we were building the house for came in. And she gave me this simple, small pink hair clip, shaped like a flower, and then she walked out. And I broke down. I wept there in that empty house we had built. Not because the gift was so overwhelming, or that I was so moved by her gratitude. It was because I realized that the entire week I was there, just like all the other weeks for the other houses I had come to build, I hadn't given her any mind. She was just there to receive a house, and I was there to build it. My labor, my untrained, unskilled labor, I believed, was so valuable and so irreplaceable, that it warranted putting me on a plane, taking me across the country and across the border, for me to spend a week building, and turn around and come home.

I still wonder just how different it could have been, if I had opened my eyes to how that little girl might have been seeing things, seeing this group of American teenagers descend upon her home, not speak to her at all, build for a week, and then leave, never to be heard from again. I still wonder just how different it could have been if I had opened my eyes sooner to how God might be blessing me through the gifts and generosity of that little girl, of that entire family.

This is not a call to scrap any kind of service project ever, nor is this a call to cut any kind of mission trip we're set to send out. As Pastor Ben put it when the pastoral team was talking about this series and in particular this sermon, you can outsource building a house; you can outsource giving a meal; but you can't outsource a relationship.

And friends, if our hope is truly to embody the gospel to someone, a relationship is what we're after. Sure it can happen in the context of a meal that's provided or a home that's built, but the call is deeper now; the investment is deeper, because ultimately it's the restoration of the whole person and of ourselves that we're seeking. That means relationship, that means giving and receiving. Relationships take time, and they go both ways.

Friends, go and be that good news, that gospel to someone, and do so recognizing that they might be that good news to you too.

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