

10th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Luke 7:11-17; Galatians 1:11-24

This is the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time. But how can it be the 10th Sunday? Didn't Ordinary Time just begin last Sunday, and should that not make this the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time? Not really. The first season of Ordinary Time is actually between the observance of Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. The time between Epiphany (which is on January 6 of each year) and Ash Wednesday (which is the Wednesday before the first Sunday in Lent) is a season of Ordinary Time. Some liturgists prefer to call that period Epiphany Season (as I do, in order to keep us centered on the story of Jesus) and others call it Ordinary Time. In liturgical circles, it is called both, according to preference. Of course, the beginning of Lent is determined by the date of Easter in a given year. Therefore, the number of Sundays between Epiphany Day and Ash Wednesday fluctuate. For example, if Easter is on April 7 in a given year, then Ash Wednesday would have to be February 21. Consequently, that would make Epiphany Season cover eight Sundays that would be between January 6 and February 21. That, in turn, would make June 3 (Trinity Sunday) the 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time and, consequently, that would make this Sunday the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time! But if Easter would be earlier, that would make the Sundays of Easter Sunday seven or six Sundays in length. Consequently, the missing Sundays of Ordinary Time would be transferred to this season of the year, with Ordinary Time beginning on the 8th or even 7th Sunday.

I Kings 17:8-16 is the story of Elijah's intervention on behalf of a widow of Zarephath and her son. This story has two pre-conditions that are terribly important to the story.

The first pre-condition is that the author tells us "the word of the Lord came to (Elijah), saying, 'Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon and live there, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you'" (17:8). The author is particularly specific in wanting the reader to know that this incident takes place in the nation of Sidon and in the city of Zarephath. The widow is identified with that city. Why is this important? The two miracles that God will work here (the provision of food for the widow and her family [I Kings 17:8-16] and the raising back to life of her son [17:17-24]) are done in a Gentile land and to a Gentile person. There is no indication that this widow is a believer in Yahweh (in fact, she says to Elijah, "As the Lord *your* God lives" in vs. 11). Rather, if she is religiously consistent with the people of Sidon, she is a believer in Ba'al. But the importance of this passage is that the author wants the reader to recognize that the first miracles done by the man who is recognized as Israel's greatest prophet were done in a Gentile land and not in Israel, to a woman who was a widow (see below), and to a person who was not a believer in Yahweh. Even this early in the biblical record, God does not confine himself to one nation or to one chosen people in his work of liberation and transformation!

The second pre-condition the author wants the reader to note is that the person for whom Elijah works miracles is a "widow" and her son an orphan! Even with Israel's protective laws, a widow was uniquely vulnerable. But in a pagan nation like Sidon, this was even truer, for there would be no laws to protect her. In fact the phrase "widows and orphans" was virtually synonymous with the "poor and powerless" in the ancient Near East. Widows and orphans were hardly protected by the laws of the land in a nation like Sidon, and whether protected (as they would be in Israel) or not (as they would be in Sidon), they were the people who were most vulnerable in

society and thus most likely to be exploited (e.g., Deut. 14:29; 16:11; 24:20; 26:12; Ps. 94:6; Is. 47:8, 9). Thus, the ancient reader would have known that this story was about an exceedingly vulnerable person because the political (a pagan nation), religious (Gentile) and economic (widow) systems were particularly arrayed against her. What is significant is that, because Elijah's first miracle is on behalf of that person who was most vulnerable in the society of her day, the author wants us to recognize that what Elijah was about was justice for all as the inevitable extension of relationship with Yahweh. Therefore justice is what any person committed to Yahweh ought to be about, as well.

The encounter between Elijah and the widow begins, not with Elijah asking the woman what he could do for her, but rather asking the woman to do something for him! He begins as the supplicant, the one under obligation. "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink", he requests, and then follows it with "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand". It is then that he learns that she has only "a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die" (vs. 12). Elijah asks her to share the little that she has with him, and then prophesies, "For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: the jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth" (vs. 14). The widow takes Elijah at his word, prepares a bread roll for him, and the miracle occurs as he had promised. "The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail" because she had believed "the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah" (vs. 17).

Thus, through Elijah's intervention, God supplied the economic needs for this Gentile widow for three years (18:1), until the drought ended. But this economic intervention that sustained the lives of this woman and her son did not occur simply because God acted through Elijah. Rather, it occurred because she chose to believe in Elijah and in Elijah's God – a belief that went against all that her society and culture held as true. It was that, as Jesus often said, "Your faith has saved you"! She was blessed with abundance because she chose to believe the promise of another than her nation's god, and then acted upon that belief. By doing so, she had acted out the Iron Rule that builds people of power, "Never do for others what they can do for themselves", for she could not make the meal multiply but she could choose to share the little that she had with the man of God, Elijah! And that faith-filled sharing guaranteed the multiplication of that food.

Psalm 146 speaks of God's commitment to bringing about justice on the earth for those who are the powerless, the marginalized and the captive.

The opening lines of the psalm direct the reader (or hymn-singer) to God. "Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish" (vss. 1-4).

The psalm calls the believer to praise God and to place one's trust in him – not in one's political, economic or religious institutions. But that command to trust God then begs the inevitable question: "Why?" "Why should one place his trust in God and not in a nation's or city's leaders?" The answer of the psalmist is simply remarkable.

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the aliens. He upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (146:5-9).

This is a remarkable statement both because of its comprehensive sweep and its single focus. The essential question underlying this passage is, “For what ‘are those whose help is in the God of Jacob’ happy” (146.5). Why should we praise and worship God? The Psalmist answers that question this way:

“We should be happy because God keeps faithful with us, executes justice for the oppressed, feeds the hungry, sets prisoners free, heals the blind, lifts up the defeated, loves those who act justly, watches over aliens, and protects orphans and widows – the most vulnerable of society. That’s why we should worship God.”

God’s commitment to justice is unquestionably stated here. The list is surprisingly long and surprisingly comprehensive. God is concerned with the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the defeated, those who need justice, the alien, the orphan and widow!

It is crucial not to spiritualize this psalm! To spiritualize it is to miss both its very essence and its punch! No one can honestly read this psalm and then insist that God’s chief desire is only for personal spiritual transformation. It just won’t work! It is the politically powerless, the economically poor, the socially marginalized in society for whom God cares the most. These are the people with whom God deals. These are the ones whom God cares especially about. We should rejoice at such a priority on God’s part. Therefore, service of the poor and the powerless should become our priority, as well – if we perceive ourselves as people after God’s own heart!

Thus, the psalmist ends, “The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord” (vs. 10)!

Luke 7:11-17 presents the account of how Jesus committed a miracle for a widow when he raised her son back to life. As such, it is the second of three miracles that appear in the seventh chapter of Luke that embody the salvation Jesus is bringing to humanity by bringing “good news to the poor, release to captives, recovering the sight of the blind and setting free the oppressed” (4:17-18).

Jesus, entering the city of Nain, meets a funeral procession on its way to the tomb. The people are bearing the body of a young man, “his mother’s only son, and she was a widow” (vs. 12). Those few words tell us a great deal, for this woman is now devoid both of a husband and an only son. In those words is captured the most profound personal, economic, legal and even religious loss.

The personal loss, of course, is of the two men in this woman's life – and there is no indication in the story of any daughters or extended family; so she has been deprived of the two most important people in her life.

The economic loss is that her means of financial support and economic place in the community has been taken away from her. If her husband had owned land, a business or a means of production, that would have passed to her son for the son to manage. But with the son's death, that would mean that any wealth that family might have would go to the next male in the family line or could be taken from her to pay any indebtedness. She would now be financially insolvent, and would have been reduced from the peasant class to being a beggar or prostitute.

The legal loss is that this widow no longer had any legal status in the community. All her property could be taken from her, and she would have no means of legal defense or representation within the Jewish court system. She would have now become, legally, a “non-person”.

The religious loss is that she would no longer have access to the religious life or status in Israel, because a woman was not thought as being capable of theological reflection or thought. The men of the village would regularly gather with the rabbi in order to reflect together theologically, and it would be in such gatherings that many of the decisions of the village and of individual family situations would be resolved (applying the Mosaic Law to each situation). She would not be welcome at such gatherings and thus would no longer be represented or defended.

So the loss of this widow and mother was grave, far more than it would be in 21st century America. This woman's life, status and well being had collapsed around her because of the deaths of her husband and son. Jesus, recognizing the terrible fate that had befallen her, stops the procession and commands the young man to return to life. He does, “and Jesus gave him to his mother” (vs. 15).

Perhaps the most strategic line in this story is this sentence: “When the Lord saw (the widow), he had compassion for her and said to her, ‘Do not weep’” (vs. 13). It was Jesus' compassion for the woman that caused him to act! The raising of this dead man is not so much done for the sake of the deceased, as it was done for his mother, for in the young man's restoration of his life is the restoration of her life. With him once again alive, she now has hope personally, economically, legally and spiritually. Thus, this miracle captures the heart of Luke's gospel. The good news is for the people simply because God cares; Jesus has compassion for the struggle of ordinary people. This is what Luke is saying to us, over and over again, in his gospel. Jesus cares! And because he cares, God cares!

Galatians 1:11-24 presents the beginning of Paul's argument that the gospel he preaches is the authentic gospel as recognized by the senior church leadership and was given to him as a revelation from God. In Galatians 1:11-24, Paul tells the story of his conversion and of his call that was given to him from God to bring the gospel to the Gentile world.

As developed in the commentary on last Sunday's Epistle Lesson, the Galatians had responded enthusiastically to the gospel preached by Paul and had created churches to sustain their life together. But after Paul left those churches to continue his missionary endeavors, Christian Jews who argued that Paul had wrongly taught them had visited these churches. These Christian Jews insisted that, unless the Galatians obeyed the Mosaic Law (symbolized by their males being circumcised), they had not truly embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord. The Galatians had believed what they had just been told, got themselves circumcised and began following the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. This enraged Paul because, from his perspective, they were unthinkingly betraying the very essence of the gospel in that they were sacrificing its very essence of Christ's act of mercy that saved them in order to substitute good works as the ground of their salvation. Therefore, Paul wrote the book of Galatians to address this betrayal of faith by the Galatian churches.

Paul begins constructing his argument, not by an examination of scripture or by theological debate (he will do both later in the book of Galatians), but by becoming personal. He tells his own story of how he came to Christ, was called by God into a mission to Gentiles, was given his theology of grace by God, and informed the Jerusalem Christian leadership of that theology (which, apparently, they embraced although Paul was not seeking their approval). That story begins with the Epistle Lesson for today, Galatians 1:11-24.

Paul begins, "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (vss. 11-12). The theology Paul has proclaimed to the Galatians is a theology that was revealed to him by God. The Jerusalem apostles confirmed that theology, but Paul didn't negotiate it with them. Paul then proceeds to tell the process by which his theology came into being.

In verses 13-17, Paul begins by describing his life as a Jewish Pharisee, "zealous for the traditions of my ancestors", defending Mosaic Law and therefore "violently persecuting the church" that threatened that Law. "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus" (vss. 15-17).

Paul maintains that he did not choose God, but that God chose him; he did not embrace the gospel but the gospel embraced him. In fact, he wasn't even seeking it when the risen Jesus met him on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). "God set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace", Paul declares. Both God's call into apostleship and Paul's salvation was the product of God's prior grace. Before his heart turned toward God, before he could respond positively or negatively to God or, before he could choose to obey or ignore the Mosaic Law, before he could do anything good or bad, even before his very birth, God had already chosen both to create faith in Paul and to use Paul as God's apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 9:10-13; Eph. 1:4-6).

By his very statement, Paul intentionally likens himself to Isaiah and Jeremiah. He echoes God's call to Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5) and to the Servant in Isaiah (Is. 49:1, 5) in his own call – a call that all three men embraced to be God's messenger to the Gentiles. By intentionally doing this, Paul was linking himself to the worthies of the Old Testament and its prophetic (as opposed to its priestly and therefore the Mosaic Law) tradition.

Once he was converted and he accepted his call “to bring God's name before Gentiles and kings” (Acts 9:15), Paul tells the Galatian Christians that he “did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem” for instruction in the faith from the apostles. Rather, he “went away at once into Arabia” (vss. 16b-17). There, Paul went on retreat for three years in the wilderness as Jesus had spent 40 days, likely reflecting on his newfound faith, thinking through the theology he had been taught as a Pharisee in the light of his extraordinary experience on the road to Damascus, and receiving visions from God that helped him to build a faith equal to his calling (Gal. 1:18; Acts 9:23, I Cor. 12:1-9).

When one thinks about it, only such a time set apart for reflection and decision-making would be absolutely essential for Paul to be adequately equipped to bring the gospel and to plant the church among Gentiles. Up to this point (except for Peter's excursus of proclaiming the gospel to the “God-fearing” Gentile, Cornelius), nobody had sought to share the Christian faith with true Gentiles; consequently, no one knew how to do it. To Jews, arguing that Jesus was the Messiah, and using Christianity as a way of being supportive to the Mosaic Laws was the logical way of winning them to allegiance to Christ. But Gentiles had no understanding or appreciation of the Jewish Law and didn't even know what the word “Messiah” meant! If he were to truly live out his apostolic calling of carrying the faith into the Gentile world, Paul would have to learn to think and act and share the gospel as a Gentile. And that meant articulating a theology that would be free of the Jewish Law and of Jewish assumptions and priorities. It was the creation of this theology that became Paul's three-year task in the wilderness. He was making Christianity relevant to a new culture and constituency!

Once Paul had completed this theological task, he tells the Galatians, “I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (that is, Peter) and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother” (vss. 18-19). The implication is that Paul shared with Peter and James, the two senior leaders of the church, his intention and strategy for sharing the gospel with Gentiles in pagan cities, as well as the way he would present the good news to reach them. The further implication of verses 18-23 was that he was not seeking to be commissioned by them but they apparently confirmed his interpretation of Christian faith as being theologically orthodox. So, Paul concludes, “I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia proclaiming the faith I once tried to destroy. And they (that is, the apostles and leaders of the church) glorified God because of me” (vss. 21-24). Thus, Paul, his mission and the theology lying behind that mission was embraced by the church leadership in Jerusalem. And that was the same mission and theology that Paul had proclaimed to the Galatian churches.

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle C Ordinary Time 10.doc)