

An All-In Faith

1 Kings 17: 8-16 Mark 12: 38-44

Last week, we talked about spiritual decisions. We looked at the story of Ruth and Naomi, and how an extended period of growth and understanding about Judaism prepared and informed Ruth's decision to follow her mother-in-law in journeying to a foreign land for her, Judah. During the time with her husband and her mother-in-law, Ruth learned about this people of the Torah-Law and their one God who was bound to this people by a covenant of love and grace, something no other god would *ever* do, certainly not the gods of her tradition. Ruth had been making smaller decisions all along the way. When the big decision came about whether to stay like her sister Orpah, or go in faith with Naomi, she knew what to do and responded without hesitation.

We also looked at Jesus' encounter with the scribe who respectfully asked Jesus, the Teacher, to render a teaching on the greatest of the commandments. The scribe was in complete agreement with Jesus' teaching on loving God and loving neighbor, and even added his own comments in support. For this, Jesus tells him that he is "not far" from the Kingdom. "Not far" is Jesus' way of saying that 'you understand what the Kingdom is all about, but you have not made any commitment to it, and apparently have no intention of making any commitment to it.' "Not far" is not "there."

Decisions matter. We grow our decision-making ability as people of faith all the time along our journey through life. As I said last week, that accumulated wealth of decision-making leaves us either strong or weak in our faith commitment to the way of Jesus and the Kingdom.

This week, those decisions are up for review again as the challenge is presented on whether or not we're all-in on our faith commitment or not. Let me say in advance that this is not a matter of simply following one's gut instinct and making a complete mess because you-believed-what-you-believed and didn't consider the range of options that the Spirit of God might lead you to consider. Being all-in doesn't mean making a decision for which you are unprepared for the consequences. Being all-in doesn't mean harming yourself or being reckless. The line between faithfulness and foolishness needs to be clear. Faithfulness is never foolishness. It may look like foolishness to those who have no faith, as the apostle Paul would relate in his letters. Indeed, faithfulness is not foolishness, but it is quite demanding at times if it has any value.

Turning to the passage about the prophet Elijah, we need to remember that Elijah is on the run, fleeing from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. They badly want Elijah dead.

In his flight, God eventually sends Elijah to a widow by the village of Zarephath which is far outside (safely distant and remote) from Israel (and the King and Queen) in Phoenicia which today is Lebanon. This widow is not a Jew. In fact, she is from the area that Queen Jezebel calls home; Elijah is in the Queen's backyard, so to speak. The widow was likely a follower of the Ba'al gods like Jezebel, and has scant (if any) knowledge of Yahweh, God of the Jews.

The widow was preparing her last meal for herself and her son, and then expected to die. With Elijah's request for water, she was ready and willing to help. But when he asked for **food**, an item of more substance and value, she drew the line. He had gone too far with his expectations from her. The man of the Yahweh-God was asking too much. His request exceeded her limit. There was no way she should be expected to comply, being down to their last portions of food. But Elijah insists, telling her in the two favorite words of God's messengers; "Fear not." He tries to assure her, "Trust in my God who told me to come to you. Neither the jar of flour nor the jug of oil will run out.'

Perhaps figuring that, if this was going to be her last meal anyway, why *not* share it with this strange prophet? Or maybe she was persuaded by his faithfulness, the witness of commitment and devotion by this prophet and his faith in **his** God. She did as he requested. Indeed, the flour and the oil never did run out.

But the widow had to make a decision, a decision worth our attention. She would rightly be asking herself things like, *'Shouldn't I just take care of myself? What do I care about what happens to this guy who arrives out of nowhere? Should I trust in the promise of this God of **his** and stick my neck out, doing something I have **no** practical reason to do?'* She seems to have no expectation that her gods will do anything to save her from their desperate plight.

Her faith has found its outermost boundary; there is no further. But the demand of faith was a summons to cross the boundary, to exceed the limit of her own vision, to do something that quite frankly was nutty, foolish, absurd. She was called to share her last food, her last supper, with some wild-talking stranger.

Perhaps she's wondering: *'Is there any future after this last meal? This last meal **isn't** going to give us life... is it?'* Bumping up against the limitation of existing faith levels brings us to the door of possibility, to the unknown potential, to the chance of utter and abysmal failure, and to the mystery of God who meets and blesses the faithfulness of his servants. That's when faith grows. That's when faith is all-in.

And that's the message we need to recall and retain. It isn't just how you answer that ground shaking challenge. The primary issue is getting oneself to the point of facing such a challenge. If challenges have come and gone unanswered, then this boundary-breaking point is never encountered.

Our faithfulness should always be seeking its limits, its boundaries. If we're being confronted by the challenge to push beyond our known boundaries, to trust, to commit, and to wonder if perhaps you've lost your mind, then we're pushing in the right direction. It shows how God's promise is working hard in you, and your faith is set to grow powerfully *however you decide*. Either way, all-in or all-out, you have been challenged by your faithful limit, and you will likely remain challenged by it. It becomes the yeast that quietly grows in your spirit.

In the passage from Mark's gospel, Jesus' warns about being infatuated by wealth, prestige, and power before today's story of the widow. Jesus cites the teachers of the law, making a great display of their faith, but really how they flaunt their power and position. These religious leaders don't mind a widow left penniless, homeless, or sick. Their version of sacred righteousness is corrupt, based on strict adherence to the laws and sanctions that they have interpreted to govern God's people. The well-being of God's people is not the concern, only their righteousness. It's as if the well-being of God's people was somehow separate from the just and righteous will of God. Despite such indifference to God's poor people, they pray at length as if God was sitting around waiting to hear their unique and profound wisdom. They're useless and not at all the models that Jesus' disciples should esteem.

Jesus and his disciples are in the temple, and the show of the day is at the temple's collection box. Rich people could see just how generous other rich people were being (or not), and the poor people could see how they were really poor as rich people ***gave away*** more than what the poor earned in a whole year.

Imagine the facial expressions of onlookers as the coins rattle into the collection box, like the jackpot on a one-armed-bandit. Even the disciples are getting into it. Their excited chatter joins the others. Jesus is rolling his eyes; these disciples just don't get it. They're still thinking that the rich are blessed and the poor are cursed. Wrong!

He wonders how to get them **focused**. Then this shabby widow steps to the collection box. Plink. Plink. She's done. A look of dismay and disdain appears on the faces of the onlookers at such a paltry sound. Silly old widow; why bother at all?

But Jesus seizes the moment. 'This is what I mean,' he tells his dullard disciples. 'This widow put in her last coins, and although a tiny amount, her **faith** is so much greater. She gave out of her poverty. The wealthy give out of their wealth.' The wealthy had plenty after they gave their "big" gift. That deposit in the collection box really didn't matter to them or affect their lives at all. But the widow had next to nothing. Her gift was truly faithful, a reflection of her truly faithful **spirit**.

The wealthy had already provided for themselves quite nicely. They didn't have to worry about their security. They could take a month-long cruise after they made their offering at the temple. Yet their gift was a demonstration both of their blessing by God and hence their righteousness before God.

Jesus' teaching about the widow hits two marks.

First, it skewers the notion that those deemed righteous by religious authority in the Temple are in fact righteous. The gaudy giving is the pretense of piety. True righteousness would recognize the desperate needs of people around them, particularly the widow who received no benefit from the wealthy dumping money into a Temple collection box. This dereliction by the religious system is what the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures had been railing about for centuries.

Second, it highlights true piety and faithfulness by the widow, the one who may be regarded as one abandoned by God's blessing because she is a widow. In her poverty, she was all-in with her faithful obligation, giving what little she had out of her poverty while the wealthy gave whatever amount they wanted and stayed wealthy. Hers was a witness of faith that God would not abandon her in her poverty and distress. The wealthy had contempt for such faithfulness and for the providence of God, ensuring that they would remain wealthy while also appearing righteous, but without really having to trust in God for their well-being – a steady theme in Jesus' ministry and teaching. The widow was all-in; the wealthy were not.

It reminds us of the story from several weeks ago about the rich man who went away sad because of his great wealth that Jesus wanted him to give away to the poor in order to join him in the promise of new life in the Kingdom. Jesus told the rich man that he had to be all-in, a challenge he was not ready to meet. For him, this life was too good to give up altogether.

For the widow, she was dependent on the grace of God, and probably had been for quite a while. Of course, the terms 'widow' and 'poor' are synonymous in Jesus' time. A widow like this would have been familiar with poverty and struggle and faith. That's another reason why the poor gain elevated status; their life experience is the practice of faithfulness. For the wealthy righteous, their faith is a compartment called religious life in which they practice ritual and observe the Torah-Law when it applies. That's a very different experience.

We can say that the widow, one of the nameless, faceless poor, did not wring her hands over her last two coins. She had probably been in this situation before, and would likely see it again. Her faith was life practice. She was all-in on her faith, a life practice that was familiar ground.

All-in or not so much: we grow our faith forward as it becomes our life practice. Again, we're called to faithfulness, not foolishness. Our faith progresses to its boundaries when we take its challenges seriously. Our faith develops as we engage and practice it so when that occasion comes when we need to be all-in, we might have faith to surrender our last meal and our last coins in genuine trust that God's blessing awaits, and waits until we do so.