

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

It's possible that lessons about widows in desperate circumstances have become so familiar to us that it's hard to find something new in the lessons we hear today. They affirm for us what God is all about, and what we've come to expect: divine intervention in the lives of people who are at the fringes of society, alone and unprotected, often invisible to others who haven't experienced their situation and don't understand it.

In the First Kings story of Elijah and the widow, we catch a very real glimpse of what life was like in those ancient days. A prophet—a man called by God to be God's voice to others—is just as thirsty and hungry as everyone else in Israel because of the long drought that plagued their land for several years. God has work for Elijah to do, including his confrontation with the prophets of Baal we heard about last week, so God sends him to this widow who will give him sustenance to live and serve the Lord. He arrives with something of a sense of entitlement—"Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink....bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." She is, after all, a woman and a widow, so serving him is her role in that time, but Elijah soon learns that she has little to give him and really isn't any better off than he is. The first miracle comes when a tiny bit of meal and a little bit of oil become enough to feed three people for the duration.

But then there's trouble in Zarephath: the widow's son becomes ill and dies. Her words to Elijah speak volumes: "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son." Until that moment nothing has happened that was difficult for Elijah to handle. God sent him to the woman to be fed, so he probably wasn't too surprised when her food and drink became enough to sustain the need. But we can see that Elijah was not prepared to deal with her son's death. "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?" We didn't see a lot of compassion in the prophet Elijah before the boy's death, but suddenly he understands her need.

A similar understanding is evident in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus has just come from Capernaum, where he healed the centurion's slave, a miracle made even more miraculous because the centurion's request for his slave's healing was indirect, and the healing took place without Jesus ever actually seeing or touching the slave. Afterward, a large crowd follows him to Nain, where he encounters the funeral of a widow's only son. He immediately sees her grief and brings the man back to life. No one speaks with him, no one tells him how sad the situation is. He just sees it and acts on it out of his compassion for the woman.

Both of these stories speak of God's miraculous power to heal. But there's always more. What does the God's Spirit want us to hear from these lessons? How do these stories of ancient times apply to us today? Those are questions I always ask as I begin preparing to speak to you about scriptures. If we don't enter more deeply into God's word by considering the answers, we—all of us—are missing the opportunity to be transformed! These stories reminded me of the work we as the church are called to do in the world—to feed the hungry, care for those who are sick and in prison, *love each other*, even when it takes more time and effort and energy that we want to give.

In recent months, there's been a marked increase in the number of folks coming to our office to request financial assistance. It seems that after we help someone, the word gets out and one after another, people call or come by to see if we can somehow help them, too. Life in Rutherford County is much more difficult than most of us know, and the stories these people tell are similar in many ways. Some people call with alarming frequency; they have had no income for months, even years,

and rely on financial assistance to meet their basic needs. Others have been caught off guard by illness or job loss. Disability and drug addiction are often evident. Poverty and hunger are common situations in Rutherford County; and frankly, the help that we are able to provide is like putting a Band-aid on a deep, festering wound.

When someone comes to St. Francis for help, I take time to sit with them and ask them to tell me their story. There's much to be learned about people as they speak about themselves, but more importantly, I've found that as they share their story with someone who listens with some interest, it often relieves their discomfort about having to ask for help and it also gives them some hope that they'll be able to find a way out of their predicament.

Last week a young mother came to ask for help to pay her family's utility bill, which totaled around five hundred dollars, two-thirds of that past due. Almost immediately I sensed her hostility. She would not look at me, and when I began to ask the questions that would tell me why she was there, it got worse. Her answers were curt, but I learned that she had been laid off from her job and her husband's income wasn't enough to support the couple and their three young children. I explained that I wouldn't be able to pay the full amount, and asked her to give me identification and fill out a form—standard procedure. But then she asked why I was being mean to her. I was surprised—I thought I was being kind and helpful. What I realized later is that because I have never been in her situation, I have no real idea what it feels like. And because I've heard variations of her story many, many times, I probably was not as compassionate as I could have been. Shame on me! I wish I could replay the whole encounter. As I thought about it, into my mind popped these words: "in your compassion, forgive us our sins." Just as Jesus has compassion for us, so we should have compassion for others.

Compassion is defined as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it. It's more than just empathy, that feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions. Compassion doesn't stop at feelings, but leads to mercy, kindness or help given to people who are in a very bad or desperate situation. It's a rare story about our Lord Christ that doesn't show his compassion, and it's one of the most important things he teaches us about how to live with each other. It seems, then, that it should be a defining trait of all who follow him; but I think we find it to be a bit of a challenge.

Perhaps that's because of that other word that defines Christ: love. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Easy to say, but not so easy to do. In order to love others, we must see Christ in them. Truthfully, we first must see them, recognize them as human beings like ourselves. In order to do that, we must remove the obstacles—the fences, walls, divisions, and judgments, the busyness of our lives, and even our electronics, so that we can see each other as Christ sees us. We cannot love each other until we do, and if we cannot love each other, how can we say that we're following Christ?

"What have you against me, O man of God," the widow said. "Why are you being mean to me," the young mother said to me. The widow's words surely stayed with Elijah, just as the young mother's words have stayed with me. And just as Elijah called upon the Lord to help him make things right, so do I.

Let us pray:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that we may serve you in love, compassion, and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*