

The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost • November 8, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

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

“Abandon”

You may never have visited this quaint seaside town – it’s probably more “rustic” than “quaint,” actually – but you’ve probably seen pictures of one like it. A woman lived there. She and her husband had long dreamed of starting a bed & breakfast in their little coastal community, hosting the visitors that came down to the sea. After a few years of planning and preparation, fixing up a house near the shore, converting the upstairs into guest rooms and installing a classic, wood-burning stove in the kitchen, they opened for business. It wasn’t all that long before this B&B started to become well-known. Sure, the husband and wife team were gracious hosts – they’d just added a baby boy to the family, too – but one thing in particular stood out: pancakes! This woman would make some of the best pancakes you’ve ever tasted... all organic, too. Things were going pretty well for the family as visitors came and went, sharing tales from their hometowns. They’d even host international visitors from time to time, learning about foreign cultures while their guests feasted on pancakes. They were living out their dream!

But after a few years, things changed. The woman’s husband fell ill and passed away from a condition which ran in his family. But she couldn’t – wouldn’t – give up on their dream. Their young son depended on her, so she set out to do her best as a single mom. She would still greet her guests with her famous pancakes, providing these visitors a friendly place to stay. It was hard, but she made do, even though sometimes she had to ask friends for help. But after a time, things got worse. Business literally dried up after unfavorable weather patterns kept the rain away from their area, devastating crop production. As you might imagine, the economy tanked. With people becoming increasingly sensitive to the costs of travel, fewer and fewer people came to visit this little village on the sea. After an all-too-short while, they stopped coming altogether. At that point, it seems like everything went rapidly downhill: with no income and no outside support, what could this woman do to support her son? Fortunately, she had a stock of supplies in her kitchen for the B&B – especially for the most popular items – so they ate pancakes! But the goods in the pantry could only last so long, and as their stock dwindled, so did her hope.

One morning, she woke from a particularly vivid dream. In it, God told her to feed a visitor that He would send to her town. She wasn’t a Christian, but she might have described herself as “spiritual.” Even so, she’d never put much trust in the God that some of her guests described when they talked about religion during meals. A few days passed, though, and no visitor appeared, so she began to come to terms with the harsh reality of her family’s situation. Her pantry was now empty, but for enough ingredients for her to fix one last pancake supper. Crushed, she headed out to the entrance of town to gather some fuel for her stove. She had abandoned all hope.

But then, the oddest thing happened. A man was just coming into town: a *visitor* – and a foreigner, by the look of him. He asked for a drink, which the woman agreed to provide; however, she had to hold back a bitter laugh when he also asked for something to eat. Not wanting to be rude, she explained her situation to the man... and this stranger reassured her that His God would provide food for all of them. If only she would use what she had to make him a pancake, God would keep her supplied with what she needed to keep making those pancakes until the rain came back, restoring the life of this town. Would she risk depriving her son of one last meal before starvation set in? Would she act on the promise of this visitor and his God? In order to do so, she would have to abandon her doubt.

You’ve already heard what happened next. The widow had faith in God’s promise through this foreign man, the prophet Elijah. And God provided for Elijah through her, making sure that the

members of her household had their daily bread for about three and a half years! God used what little she had to offer to do great things.

In our Gospel text, we hear another well-known episode involving a widow; however, we don't have any details about this woman beyond what Jesus told his disciples. But like the widow in that seaside town of Zarephath, this woman gives out of her poverty. She has next to nothing – less than one percent of one day's wages for the average laborer – but in faith, she gives it to God. Both of these widows did something that would be incredibly difficult for most people to do: **in their need, they acted in faith, trusting that God would provide. They abandoned the illusion of self-reliance.** That's something that people still struggle with today, even Christians like you and me. We might react strongly against such an act of abandon; even think it's crazy or downright negligent to trust that God will provide for our needs. But whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to give us our daily bread. Most of the time, God does not make pancakes miraculously appear on the table. He does so through the "ordinary" means of employers who pay us, so that we might buy food for ourselves and our families, from vendors who work with the people who farm and prepare products like wheat, dairy, and fruits. *That* is how God usually makes pancakes! **Self-reliance, then, is really just a trick of the mind that would keep us from appreciating how God is at work to provide for us.** And like the widow of Zarephath, God calls us to abandon our self-reliance to His gracious care.

Though we are not all widows, you and I do experience poverty. For some of us, that poverty might be like that which we heard about in our readings: a poverty of finances and material wealth. Especially in these times, when many are unemployed and seeking work, that's a reality among us. There are, however, other kinds of poverty. You might be struggling with a poverty of health if you're facing sickness, surgery, or chronic illness. But I think that the most pressing poverty that our congregation feels is a **poverty of time**, an inability to do everything that we feel is important.

We're coming to the close of the church calendar in the next few weeks. Historically, this time of the church year has called believers to look ahead to the time of Jesus' return and the end result of the victory that he won on the cross, when sin, death, and the devil will be forever defeated. As Christians, each of us can take this time to reflect on what's truly important in our lives and to consider how we might be living out our faith. **In which areas of your life do you feel the pressures of self-reliance weighing down upon you?**

Before this weekend is over, commit some time to the following exercise. Ask yourself: What should be the five most important things in my life? To draw this into an even sharper focus, think about what those things might be in light of the type of poverty (e.g., material, physical, temporal) that you feel is your greatest challenge – the area in which you feel most pressed. Once you've done that, look at how you've used whatever you've been given in that area over the past week, month, or even year. Are the things that you listed as the most important in line with how you have spent your wealth, health, and time? Or have you been more focused on trying to get what you feel you lack than on making use what you actually have, regardless of how little it might be? Consider what you can give out of your poverty and turn it over to God, asking Him to use it to do great things. He calls us all from lives of self-reliance into lives that depend on His grace through His Son, Jesus, confident that He will provide our daily bread.

God gives His grace abundantly – to the widow, to the orphan, to you and me. God gives grace with abandon.

Amen.