

Crossing the Line

1 Kings 17:8-24

Luke 7:11-17

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09 June 2013

Elijah was on the run. Ahab, King of Israel, did not take criticism well, and the king, Elijah proclaimed, had brought a drought on the land for marrying the foreign woman Jezebel and worshiping her god, Baal. Elijah's rebuke of the king struck too close to home for the king, so Elijah hid from Ahab's fury in a remote wadi. But, his small oasis in the desert was drying up, and soon the ravens would not come any longer with bread. It was time to move on. "Go now to Zarephath and live there," God instructs his prophet, "for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." Zarephath is no obvious choice. It is the center of Baal worship and homeland of Queen Jezebel. A widow is no obvious host. She has meager resources and is unlikely to welcome a strange man into her home.

If Elijah thought these things, he did not speak them. He only went to make his home in Zarephath. When he arrived, it was even graver than expected. The widow was young and caring for a boy still too small to contribute to the family's welfare. Their god, Baal, had not smiled upon them and neither had the rest of Zarephath so this widow and her son lived at the very edge of town. On the day she met Elijah, she left her son at home because she could not bear to tell him that the sticks she was gathering would be for their last meal. They had endured the drought as long as possible; starvation was at hand.

Elijah was bold to ask her for a drink of water, and she begrudgingly agreed. But when he asked for a morsel of bread, it was too much. She could not spare her very last meal. Perhaps she did not know that Elijah had been walking for days already without food, or that he was fleeing from the wrath of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel in the south. Perhaps she did not know that Elijah worshipped a God other than Baal. She certainly knew he was a stranger. Did she also know that he was supposed to be her enemy? Did she know that God had appointed her, with her meager resources, to care for this strange wild-man?

Overruling this desperate woman's objections, Elijah insists that she feed him then promises that her store of flour and oil will not run dry before the end of the drought. The widow consents, even taking Elijah into her own home. Her jar of flour is not emptied and her oil does not fail. When this widow's only son dies some time later, Elijah is so moved by grief and a sense of injustice that he lays the boy on his own bed, stretches himself across the boy, and cries out to the Lord, "let this child's life come into him again." And the Lord listened to Elijah.

By crossing the line to live in the enemy town of Zarephath with this widow who seemingly had nothing to offer, Elijah becomes a sign of God's abundant provision and a channel of God's life-giving power. Moreover, Elijah also experiences for himself the provision of God as receives the

widow's hospitality and eats daily of the never-depleted bread. Elijah's young prophetic ministry is confirmed and empowered when the young boy is restored to life.

When we meet Jesus in chapter seven of Luke's gospel, he is not on the run. Other than suffering rejection in his hometown of Nazareth (4:16-30), Jesus is on a roll here. He has been traveling throughout Galilee teaching and doing wonders that gradually reveal his identity as God's Son and Israel's messiah. The crowd that follows Jesus grows each week, and some have even committed themselves as Jesus' disciples. As the interest in Jesus grows, however, so do the concerns about his ministry. Increasingly, Jesus upsets the balance of power in Israel by healing outsiders, like the son of Roman centurion (7:1-11), and socializing with unsavory characters like sinful women (7:36-50). Jesus' teachings ruffle the feathers of religious leaders because they challenge their interpretation of laws about purity and propriety.

In today's reading, Luke zooms in on one such incident. Like Elijah's story, this one takes place on the very edge of town, just inside the gate. As Jesus and his followers entered town they encountered a funeral procession where a widow weeps because her only son has died. She grieved the loss of one she loved more than her own life. She wept also with fear because there would be no one to take care of her – no husband, no son, and no family. She was alone and brokenhearted.

Jesus saw this woman who the rest of society would ignore, and he spoke to her. Jesus had compassion for her. This compassion is no onlooker's sympathy. Compassion comes from the gut, from deep within, and it moved Jesus to line-crossing action. Jesus stepped in front of the funeral procession and touched the ritually unclean stretcher (called a bier) that carried the body to its final resting place. His act was so shocking that the entire procession came to a standstill. Jesus, so moved by compassion for the widow, said to the dead man, "Rise!" The man stood up, and Jesus restored mother and son to one another. By crossing the line to touch the funeral bier of a widow's only son, Jesus reveals God's compassionate presence and he shares God's life-giving power.

But boundary-crossing ministries inevitably upset people who are happy to self-righteously stay on their side of the line. Jesus' compassion toward the widow and his unclean but life-giving action must have disturbed some in the crowd, for they reported these deeds to John the Baptist who questioned whether such acts were suitable for one called the Messiah. "Are you really the Messiah," John would ask, or are we to wait for someone else" (7:18-19). Even Jesus recognized that his ministry was offensive to some (7:23).

In 1971, a man named Robert Lupton felt God's call ministry in the inner city. Robert had lived most of his life in semirural parts of the Midwest. Somehow, though, he knew that it would not be enough to commute to the South Atlanta inner city while living in the safety and comfort of the suburbs. Like Elijah in Zarephath, Robert was called to the inner city, "to live there." That year, Robert, his wife Peggy, and their two boys sold their suburban home and moved into one of Atlanta's rougher neighborhoods. Against the advice of friends and advisors, Robert and his family were answering God's call to cross the lines of race, class, and societal expectation so that they could be neighbors. Robert tells remarkable stories about his family's journey; I will share one of them with you, in Robert's words:

She's sixty-six, mildly retarded, dangerously overweight, twice a great-grandmother and a devoted member of our church. She lives with four generations of extended family in an overcrowded, dilapidated house, but her buoyant spirit is undaunted. Since losing her youngest son in a senseless murder last Christmas Eve . . . she has redirected much of her affection to me.

"You're my buddy," she says with a broad, snaggle-toothed grin. "I pray for you every day." Then she gives me a long bear hug. She wants to sit close beside me in every church service, and although the smell of stale sweat and excrement is often nauseating, she makes me feel a little special. Her internal plumbing doesn't work as well as it used to, and she leaves tobacco smears when she kisses my cheek. But I am pleased to have Mrs. Smith by my side.

She often hints, sometimes blatantly, that she would like to come home with us for a visit. Nothing would delight her more than to have Sunday dinner with my family.

But there is a conflict. It has to do with values that Peggy and I learned from childhood. We believe that good stewardship means taking care of our belongings, treating them with respect, and getting long service from them. Our boys know that they are not to track in mud on the carpet or sit on the furniture with dirty clothes. To invite Mrs. Smith into our home means we will have filth and stench soil our couch. There will be stubborn offensive odors in our living room.

My greatest fear is that she will want to sit in my new corduroy recliner. I wouldn't want to be rude and cover it with plastic to protect it from urine stains. But I know it would never be the same again. Unknowingly, Mrs. Smith is forcing a conflict, a clashing of values upon me.

Preserve and maintain. Conserve and protect. They are the words of an ethic that has served us well. . . . Why should it be such a struggle to decide which is more godly: to welcome Mrs. Smith into my home and my corduroy recliner or to preserve the "homey aroma" of my sanctuary and get extra years of service from my furniture?

We did finally invite Mrs. Smith to have Sunday dinner in our home. And she did just as I feared she would. She went straight for my corduroy recliner. And it never has been the same. In fact Mrs. Smith even joined a Bible study in our home for the next week. Every Wednesday evening she headed right to my chair. She even referred to it as *her* chair!¹

Robert Lupton, in his move to inner city Atlanta and in opening his home to all of his neighbors, not only becomes a sign of God's compassion presence and life-giving power; he also receives God's compassionate presence and life-giving power for himself. The conflict of values leads Robert to deeper faith in Christ and renewed energy for ministry in his new home. Today, forty-two years later, Robert and Peggy are still living and ministering in South Atlanta.

¹ Robert Lupton. *Theirs Is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1989) p.8-9.

When we cross the line and make our home with unexpected people in unexpected places, as Elijah did, when we cross the line and touch the unclean people in our midst as Jesus did, when we cross the line and invite someone to sit our favorite chairs, as Robert did, we too can become sources of God's abundant provision; we too can be signs of God's compassionate presence; and we, too, can be channels of God's live-giving power. Like Elijah, Jesus, and Robert we might even find new measures of God's provision, God's compassion, and God's power at work in our very own lives. May it be so. Amen.