

## **1 Kings 17:8-16 (NRSV)**

### *The Widow of Zarephath*

<sup>8</sup>Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, <sup>9</sup>“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” <sup>10</sup>So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” <sup>11</sup>As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” <sup>12</sup>But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, 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.” <sup>13</sup>Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup>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.” <sup>15</sup>She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. <sup>16</sup>The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

## Generosity's Irony

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Text: *1 Kings 17:8-16*

I have sometimes wondered, what's the difference between fairy tales and scripture stories? And to be honest, I have never found a completely satisfactory answer. Let me show you what I mean. There's an old Eskimo tale that goes like this:

One winter there was an old woman who was left behind. She was so old that she couldn't even chew kamik leather anymore. Her family left her with only a few insects to eat. The woman said: "I'm not going to eat these poor creatures. I am old and perhaps they are young. Perhaps even a few are children. I'd rather die first..."

Just after her people went away, there entered a fox into her hut. It leaped up and started to bite her. The old woman thought: Well, I'm truly a dead person now... But the fox was behaving in a very strange manner. It was biting her over her whole body, just like it was taking off her clothing. Soon all her skin fell away. And lo! There was a new skin beneath which belonged to an attractive young woman. For the grateful insects had instructed their friend the fox to rid her of her old skin.

Next summer her family returned to the camp. But they found neither the woman or her bones. She had gone to live with the insects. It is said that she married a little blow-fly of whom she had grown quite fond.<sup>1</sup>

This tale is little different in its meaning from this morning's story from the Bible. In both stories a generous decision that would seem to doom the protagonist instead ends with rich and endless reward. The widow of Zarephath finds her jar of meal and jug of oil miraculously refilled day after day. The old Eskimo woman who refuses to eat insects, when they are the only way for her to survive, finds her youth restored. In a sly twist, she even finds romance with a blow-fly, with whom she has fallen in love.

It would not be hard to find similar folk tales in almost every culture. Generosity towards a stranger, generosity even at great self-sacrifice, is rewarded by unanticipated plenty. So, what makes one scripture and the other a folk-tale?

After much thought, I'm not sure. And then I got thinking about the question itself. Is there a kind of truth that I am looking for in scripture that one doesn't find in a folk-tale? That got me a little further. For sometimes I think that we tend believe that scripture stories are true in a historical sense. Elijah went to the widow, really. The widow really shared her and her son's last meal. The jug of oil and jar of meal really never ran out. In a subtle twist the story shifts perspective. It is no longer just a story of generosity, but a story about the power of our God and our Biblical heroes. Elijah, God's prophet, tests the widow's generosity, and then God blesses her with meal and oil everlasting. All of a sudden the story takes a turn in its meaning.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.learningtogive.org/materials/folktales/OldWomanKind.asp>

Do good, be generous, and God will reward you. For God has the power, and God has done it before. Give away your food, and God will give you plenty to eat. Give away your money, and God will make you wealthy. Do X and you will be guaranteed Y.

There has been a lot of justifiable criticism of the “prosperity Gospel.” An example is the “prayer of Jabez.” In a book by Bruce Wilkinson of the same title, readers are encouraged to pray the prayer that a man in 1 Chronicles named Jabez prayed. Wilkinson promises that God will reward you with anything you want, just the way God rewarded Jabez. It’s all about getting the formula right so that you can get what you want from God.

Now, if that’s the difference between folk-tales and scripture, if scripture means that it’s a recipe book to manipulate God, or at least to cook up some riches, then we are probably better off forgetting that it’s scripture.

On the other hand, if scripture means that the stories that are told have deep and abiding truths within them, truths that speak on many levels, then that’s something different. In that sense the tales from most cultures and religions, tales that have stood the test of centuries of retelling, may be said to be both folk-tales and scripture.

Well, all that is a rather long way of saying that I think there’s a lot of truth in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. However, it’s truth is not at the superficial level. That is, I’m pretty sure that if you try to be real generous with your meal and oil, you won’t find them mysteriously replenishing themselves in your pantry. The miracles that real scripture, and real folk-tales for that matter, want to tell us about are always much deeper than magic tricks.

Magical thinking is a lot worse than just being superficial. Let’s take our story in this morning’s reading. As magical thinking, it would go like this. The widow and her son are starving to death. She is about to prepare their very last meal of a handful of meal and a little oil. But, lo and behold, Elijah arrives on the scene. In magical thinking, the woman understands that if she is but generous, God will bless her with abundant food. In that sense, Elijah is her savior. He has come by in the nick of time.

Now, it’s pretty obvious how little justice this perspective does to the story. In the story the dilemma is much more poignant. The facts are the same. The widow and her son are about to share their last spare meal. Once they eat it, the pantry is totally empty. Then comes Elijah, hungry and thirsty. The miracle isn’t that the woman now realizes she will be saved. The miracle is that at the moment when sharing what little she has means starvation just that much sooner, the woman acts out of generosity. She is not generous in the expectation of a miracle. She is generous despite the high cost of her generosity.

Seen through these eyes the story raises a much more interesting question about generosity. If generosity isn’t a quid pro quo, if it isn’t something you do with the promise of a high rate of return, why be generous? And what is the story of the widow of Zarephath, or countless other folk-tales, trying to say that may help us understand it better?

Let’s turn to another folk tale for some help. This one comes from India.

Sushil was a miser. Though his treasure house was full, he was too stingy to give away even the smallest coin. And since food cost money, he ate almost nothing, and starved his family and servants besides.

One morning, as Sushil took his daily walk through town, he saw a young boy eating a sweet rice dumpling. Sushil’s mouth watered as he made his way home.

“If only I could ask my wife to make me a sweet dumpling,” he said to himself. “But if I wanted one, so would my wife. And if my wife wanted one, so would the children. And if the children wanted one, so would the servants. So I had better just keep quiet.”

When Sushil arrived home, he said nothing about a dumpling. But he wanted one so badly, he felt weak. His legs shook, and he had to go to bed.

His wife, Nirmala, came to him. She asked, “What is wrong, my husband?”

Sushil lay groaning and clenched his teeth.

“Is there something you want?” said Nirmala.

Sushil’s face grew red, then purple. At last he squeaked, “I would like a sweet rice dumpling.”

“That is no problem,” said Nirmala. “We are wealthy enough. Why, I will make sweet dumplings for the whole town!”

Sushil gasped in horror. “You will make a pauper of me!”

“Well then,” said Nirmala, “I will make dumplings for our family and servants.”

“Why would the servants need any?” said Sushil.

“Then I will make them for us and the children.”

“I am sure the children can do without.”

“Then I will make one for you and one for me.”

“Why would you want one?” said Sushil.

Nirmala sighed and went out, and returned after a while with a single sweet dumpling. Then she looked on as Sushil, moaning with delight, devoured every crumb.

Now, it happened that all this was seen by Sakka, the King of Heaven, who was sitting on his marble throne in his thousand-mile-high palace. “Not in seventy-seven millennia,” he declared, “have I ever seen such a miser. I will teach this fellow not to be so stingy.”

So the god waited till the next day, when Sushil left on his morning walk. Then he made himself look just like Sushil and came down to earth.

Sakka walked into Sushil’s house as if he were Sushil himself. In Sushil’s own voice he told a servant, “Run through the town and invite everyone you see. Today Sushil will share his wealth!”

When Nirmala heard these words, she cried, “Husband, can this be true? Heaven be praised for your change of heart!” Then she helped him open the treasure house.

Soon the people of the town arrived. “Take what you will!” said the pretend Sushil. “And if anyone who looks like me tries to stop you, drive away the scoundrel!”

“Thanks to Lord Sushil!” cried the townspeople. “The most generous man alive!” They rushed into the treasure house and loaded themselves with gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls.

Just then, the real Sushil came home. When he saw his treasure being carried out the gate, he screamed, “Robbers! Thieves! Put that back! How dare you!”

But the townspeople said, “This must be the one that Lord Sushil warned us about.” And they chased Sushil halfway across town.

Sushil rushed on to the Rajah’s court. “Your Majesty,” he declared, “the people of the town are taking all I own!”

“But your own servant invited them!” said the Rajah. “I heard him myself. Did you not give the order?”

“Never!” said Sushil. “If the order was given, I beg you to bring the one who gave it!”

So the Rajah sent a messenger. Soon came Sakka, still pretending to be Sushil, along with Nirmala and the children. The children stared wide-eyed at the two Sushils, and Nirmala nearly fainted.

“Impostor!” screamed Sushil.

“Deceiver!” screamed Sakka.

“I cannot tell the difference between you,” said the bewildered Rajah. He turned to Nirmala. “Can you say which is the true Sushil?”

Nirmala looked at both men. “Your Majesty,” she said, “may I ask them a question?”

“Certainly,” said the Rajah.

Nirmala turned to Sakka. “Is it better to be generous to yourself, to your family, to your servants, or to your neighbors?”

“It is best to be generous to all!” answered Sakka. “When you are generous, others also grow generous, and everyone is wealthier.”

Then Nirmala turned to Sushil. “Is it better to be generous to yourself, to your family, to your servants, or to your neighbors?”

“To none!” shrieked Sushil. “It is a waste of wealth that can never be regained!”

Nirmala took a deep breath, gathered the children, then drew close to Sakka. She said, “This is the true Sushil, Your Majesty.”

“But, Nirmala!” cried Sushil. “My wife! My children!”

At that, the god stepped forward, and with a blinding flash of light changed back to his own shape. “Your Majesty, I am not Sushil but Sakka. I came down from Heaven to teach this man a lesson.”

He turned to the trembling and downcast Sushil. “Do you see? You are so stingy, even your wife and children deny you.”

Sushil moaned.

“There is but one hope for you,” said Sakka. “Will you stop being such a miser?”

“Well,” said Sushil, “maybe I could be a little more generous.”

“A little more?” demanded Sakka.

“Well, maybe a little more than a little more,” said Sushil.

“You had better be a lot more generous,” said Sakka. “Or I’ll be back!”

And with another flash of light, he vanished.

“Well!” said the Rajah to Sushil. “It seems you indeed have been taught a good lesson!”

“I suppose so, Your Majesty,” said Sushil. He turned shyly to Nirmala. “Wife?” he said, holding out his hand.

“Husband!” she said, taking it. “Oh, husband, let us celebrate! I have an idea. Let us make sweet rice dumplings for the entire town!”

Sushil gasped in horror. His legs shook. He groaned and clenched his teeth. His face grew red, then purple. Then he squeaked—

“All right!”<sup>2</sup>

Oh well, it takes time to change. But you see the point. Like king Midas who turned everything he touched into Gold, when Sushil held onto his wealth, it was a sign of a contracted

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.aaronshep.com/stories/023.html>

heart. In the end, generosity is about the state of one's heart. Open or closed, it makes all the difference. The widow of Zarephath knew in that deep, almost pre-conscious place, that she would have been long dead of a different kind of starvation except for her generosity. To her, it was hardly a risk to share what she had. Amen.