

"Who do people say that I am?" It is a question Jesus asked his disciples. "You Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets," they answered. If you attend Passover meal with a Jewish family, there is a cup of wine placed on the table for Elijah.

Elijah is the most famous of the Hebrew prophets. He is the real deal. Our I Kings text today comes in the midst of a three year drought in Israel. Elijah is no stranger to King Ahab. He has confronted Ahab on other occasions – not to the liking of King Ahab. Part of Elijah's problem with King Ahab is that the king married a foreigner instead of a good Jewish woman. Elijah saw it for what it was – a convenient political marriage. Ahab married the daughter of the King of Sidon. Her name was Jezebel. Jezebel brought with her a group of priests so she could continue her worship of the Canaanite god, Baal. Ahab not only encouraged her, he actually built her a temple to the worship of Baal in Samaria.

Elijah blames this drought on Ahab for his sinful ways with this foreign woman and the worship of a foreign God. Elijah is not quiet or bashful about his confrontation with King Ahab. I will leave you to decide about God taking sides in a marriage or rain falling on the just and the unjust!

God is going to take care of Elijah during this drought. God feeds him with the help of a raven down by a river. In our text for today, God directs Elijah to Zarephath. Where is Zarephath? It is in Sidon, of course. Elijah is directed to a widow who is to feed him. It is clear that the widow is not expecting company. Maybe it is God's plan, but no one has told her. She is a widow and she has a son who is apparently not able to help make a living.

Life is most difficult in this society for a widow. The drought has taken its' toll on her also. She has only a little oil and a little meal. She is gathering a few sticks to make a fire and cook a last meal for herself and her son. Then they will die. Nevertheless, Elijah asks her to fix him some food. He assures her that the oil and the meal will not run out until it rains. So, this woman in Zarephath, in Sidon, the country of Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, extends hospitality to Elijah, this stranger who is asking for food.

Hospitality – to receive as a guest. To be kind, welcoming.

We live in the South and practice Southern hospitality. Here people will offer strangers a glass of sweet tea, fix a flat tire, offer food – all in the spirit of welcoming. Maybe we remember the great depression. We have folks among us who lived through that depression. I was born just after the depression. I think a part of our welcoming comes from that time when lots and lots of folks had nothing – not even food and drink. It was a time when hungry people were not turned away, even when it meant less for the folks who were offering the hospitality.

I look at this story in I Kings today and am reminded that hospitality is important in our lives.

1. It means being a friend to one's friends. That is what builds friendship. We have the time to listen to problems. We offer our time and means to help with the needs of our friends.

If we can offer hospitality to strangers, surely, we can use it in our family and friendships.

2. Interruptions can be important. This woman who welcomed Elijah and gave him food did not know that he would bring her son back to life. It is an interesting story and I am aware that in those days it took about two days for someone to determine that a person was really dead. The widow certainly believed that Elijah had brought her son back to life. This interruption in her life has saved the life of her child.

I remember giving a ride to a boy when I was in college. I was leaving Birmingham on the way home

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to work for the weekend. Just as I left the city on Hwy 79, there was this hitch hiker. It was afternoon and he looked hot and tired. In those days it was not uncommon to give a person a ride. He had no suitcase just a bundle of clothes. Once inside the car I soon realized that he had not taken a bath in awhile. He was on his way to Kentucky – going home. Seems a van had come through Appalachia, recruiting people to harvest potatoes. They had promised big money and a good place to live for a couple of months work.

I guessed he was 16 or 17. The promise had gone sour. Living quarters were awful and the pay was only a fraction of what they had promised. He did not even have enough money to buy a bus ticket home. Of course, they would not take him home. "Mister," he said, "If you ever have any kids make sure you know where they are going if someone offers them a good deal. It may not be that good." I tried to take him by our house so he could eat a meal before going on his way, but he had a few hours of daylight and was anxious to get to Kentucky. Interruptions can be important. Fifty years and two children later, I still remember his advice.

3. Hospitality offers people a safe place. I believe that is one of the great strengths about Pilgrim. People of different races know they are welcome here. They know it is a safe place where they are accepted and welcomed as a part of our community. Gay and lesbian's know they are welcome here. Pilgrim is a safe place for them. They do not have to be afraid or watch their language or behavior any more than the rest of the community. People with different opinions and ideas find a safe place here at Pilgrim. We do have three people from our church community in Iraq – Barbara Macon's son, Skip and Lou's grandson and a friend of Miriam's working in the medical field. We care about them. At the very same time we care about Iraqi soldiers, civilians. We often take the current administration to task for this war that many of us think should never have been. It is for the wrong reasons. We are able to welcome people to this safe place who have different opinions and ideas.

4. Hospitality is the way to bless others.

Our youth group was going to teach Vacation Bible School and serve food to a poverty area in Tennessee. Since we were all white, we asked some black kids from a Presbyterian church near by to be a part of our team. We knew each other because the kids went to school together. We invited the black students to join us thinking it would help us when we got to our worksite, as most of the students there would be black. Little did we know that those four black students we invited to help us with a project would transform our whole youth group. By offering hospitality, they blessed our lives far more that we ever imagined. Not only did they help us with our project, they caused us to think differently and be more trusting of people who were not our color. We discovered they were just like us – only society had put them in a different category.

When we gather, let us be faithful to offer hospitality to each other and to the visitors in our midst. Let us offer our food to the food pantry and let us fix food at the Fire House Shelter. Let us be like the widow who offered food to Elijah. It is one of the marks of the Christian Faith.