

First Mennonite Church,
May 30, 2021
What Do You Have?
2 Kings 4:1-7



Introduction

One thing is certain about this past year. There's been a lot of time to think. There's been time to reflect on what one values most and what is less important than we once thought. I've come to the conclusion that relationships matter a lot for me and I have been incredibly grateful for the many forms of communication that have allowed us to maintain relationships during this time apart.

The Biblical story is one of relationships as well. In January 2020, before the Pandemic had become a reality for us, I had made a decision to read through the Bible from beginning to end. As I was reading the Old Testament I became intrigued by all the names of women or stories about women. I was stunned to find that there are at least 140 names of women plus a number of other stories of unnamed women. All of them are named or described in relationship to family members or encounters with other key people in the story. Most would be considered to be in supporting roles, but others like Ruth and Esther have key roles in the story of God's people.

It reminded me of how important it has been for most of us to know the names of our ancestors. The sense of connection has made us feel like we belong and that we have a place in a larger story. Often we have sought to find stories of courage and endurance, of faith and hope, in life stories that we know contained both hardship and good times.

At other times our story may have included an unnamed teacher, student or neighbour. Our encounter with this individual may also have had a profound effect on us but we share it with no name attached.

Elisha

Such is the story we heard this morning.

In the second chapter of 2 Kings, Elisha has received the mantle of Elijah the prophet as he is taken up to heaven in Elisha's presence. While Elijah had confronted those in positions of power, Elisha, the 'man of God', lived among the people, preferring the poor and the outcast, and stressed life, hope and God's grace. Elisha showed a deep sensitivity for the suffering and distressed, as we find in this story of the widow.

This story is reminiscent of another story told in 1 Kings 17 where Elijah is sent to the widow of Zarephath and asks her to make some bread for him from her last flour and oil because his source of water has dried up.

Significant story (unnamed woman) I Kings 4

In this story, the widow is identified as 'the wife of a man from the company of prophets.' As she addresses Elisha, she is relying on his knowledge of her husband's faithfulness to God. She wants to be seen as worthy of a possible miracle that can save her from losing everything, in particular her two sons to her dead husband's creditor.

Her story has a familiar ring to it. People in poverty have few options when their source of income runs out. Children scavenge the streets or garbage dumps in some countries to try to help their families put some food on the table. Some are taken from their homes and placed in the care of others, not always in caring situations. Others are forced into slave labour or prostitution. Still others become homeless and wander about at the mercy of any generosity they might find.

The fear of losing her sons was real. As a widow, with no way of earning an income, she was at the mercy of her husband's creditor. She knew the common practice. When you can't pay your debt, your sons can be taken into permanent slavery to work off the debt for the rest of their lives. And the widow? Well, we can only guess that she was at the mercy of some kind souls.

I can only imagine the agony this caused. Life clearly had not been easy. Perhaps her husband had been ill for some time. We are not told the reason, but they had to borrow in order to stay afloat. And then came the death of the bread winner of the family.

As I read this story I thought of my grandmother Mierau. As a young mother of two children under the age of four, her husband, my grandfather, became sick with a rare, painful illness in the spring of 1918. With medical help he did improve some but then the 1918 flu hit her little family. Now they all became quite sick. In her diary she wrote, "I also had it and could hardly take care of the rest. The doctor made his rounds and help was needed to do the chores."

Ten years later my grandfather died after many years of declining health. My grandmother was left with 6 children from newborn to 14. Her diaries record the help she received from extended family to be able to do the farm work that sustained them.

I think of the widow in 2 Kings, and I think of my grandmother. What could have happened to my dad and the rest of the family had they not had the supports they had? I remember hearing that grandma sold her grain when it came off the fields in the fall because she had bills to pay. Some other farmers kept their crops into the winter and spring hoping for better prices which often did not happen. She managed to keep the farm going.

What can I do for you?

When the widow came to Elisha with her dilemma, he asked her two questions. The first question was, "How can I help you?" or what can I do for you?

The question reminds me of a question Jesus asked the blind beggar in Luke 18 when the beggar kept calling out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me." Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" and the blind man responds, "Lord, I want to see." Jesus knew what the beggar needed but he wanted him to be able to name it. Perhaps Elisha's question had a similar purpose. It got the widow thinking about what she really wanted and needed here; even though we don't know whether she answered him.

Tell me, what do you have at home?

In the Biblical account, the second question that follows immediately is, "Tell me, what do you have in your house?"

Okay, so the creditor is coming for her sons, and Elisha wants to know what she has in her house? If the creditor is coming, you'd think she has probably sold anything that had value to keep him at bay as long as possible. She's out of resources! So she answers, "Your servant has nothing there at all except a little oil." In her mind, a little oil was hardly worth mentioning. It certainly wouldn't pay off the creditor.

But Elisha's mind is getting into gear. Ah! A little oil. 'Okay then, let's work with what you have.'

I am reminded of a retired pastor residing in a long term care facility felt he had lost his usefulness. His weakened heart meant that he spent a lot of time resting, and his weakened legs meant he needed to get around in a wheelchair. After sharing his feelings, the chaplain said to him, "There is still something that you could do. I know you as a man of prayer, and there are a lot of people here who could use your prayers." Yes, he could do that. It may not seem like much but it could help him move beyond himself, focusing on others.

Working with what the widow has, Elisha becomes directive and tells her to go to all her neighbours and ask them for their empty jars... and by the way, not just a few, but everything they've got. She is to bring them home, and behind closed doors she is to begin pouring her little bit of oil into the jars. It seems this would take some courage. How would one answer the curious neighbour who wanted to know, why the jars? It would also take faith and trust that something would happen.

Perhaps some of you have stories in your background that are reminiscent of this kind of last resort. Even though a positive outcome seemed impossible to imagine, something worked out. I have heard stories of the last food being eaten with nothing left for the next day, when a bag of groceries appears on the doorstep, or of a bill being owed with no access to money when a \$20 bill is found along the path. There are many times when

serious dilemmas don't resolve themselves this way, but when they do, they are truly miraculous.

In the Biblical story, the widow follows Elisha's directions. She and her sons go to all their neighbours, gather all their empty jars and bring them home. The door is closed and the widow begins following the directions she was given. Taking her own jar with its little bit of oil she starts to pour into the first jar. Soon it is full. She moves on to the next and the next and the next. The jars are filling up! She comes to the end and asks for another jar, but there are no empty ones left. And with that, we are told, "the oil stopped flowing."

During these Covid times we may have had the feeling that there's just a little bit of oil left in our jar. We have often felt as if we are losing what is most important to us – our connections with the people who really matter to us. Limited numbers at church for regular services, weddings and funerals; keeping our distance and wearing masks when around others; no visiting indoors at times; no family gatherings in our own homes, no hosting and sharing of food, limited activities, not seeing new grandbabies and the list goes on. We have felt isolated, lonely and at times disheartened. How will we keep our sanity if we have to remain so isolated, we wonder? But we all have some oil, so to speak. We live in a time where we can communicate in so many different ways: telephone, email and text, through Zoom and Facebook and Facetime, and the list goes on. We can reach out to others who are also isolated in their homes.

The words of Elisha come to us. What can I do for you? What resources do you have on hand?

I know two women who decided to do some baking for the Lighthouse each week when the Pandemic hit in March a year ago. They are still doing this more than a year later. They have been taking their small pleasure of baking and multiplying it for a community that truly appreciates it.

I know some persons who regularly pick up the phone and call others who are feeling the isolation. The minutes given are multiplied into encouragement and hope.

I think of Wildwood's annual Christmas banquet last year. It didn't seem possible because of all the Pandemic restrictions. But then the hosting committee got together and began researching how they might make something happen. Before long they had a caterer, meals were individually packaged for pick-up, a program was planned and we enjoyed a delightful Zoom Christmas Banquet.

Like the widow, we may feel that hope is but a glimmer, but if we reach out we might find an Elisha who can help us name what we have and what we can do with it so that we can experience fullness of life. This is my hope and prayer for each of us.