

“Jar and Jug Not Empty”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren, Pastor
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to begin this morning with a little image from a place where more and more of us spend more and more time, and that is on Facebook. A post on Facebook this week I found kind of intriguing and somewhat funny. It was a post of a picture of Santa Claus slightly agitated with his glasses over his eyes like he was scolding with the quote that said “Slow down! Let’s eat the damn turkey first!” which was an obvious elusion to the fact that Christmas is now hoisted upon us. The decorations were up at Friendly Center 3 days before Halloween, and some of us are finding this a little too much to handle, but the commerce forces in our society are quite strong, so we are forced to live with it, give into it or resist it, or whatever we need to do, but it is the reality in which we live now.

I want to take a moment just to think about images and thoughts related to gratitude, to Thanksgiving, to what we are grateful for at this time of the year. I want to begin by thinking about that by going to one of our culture’s favorite cartoon T.V. shows called “The Simpsons”. “The Simpsons”, you may or may not know, has been on T.V. since 1989—that’s 27 seasons, 579 episodes of the Simpson family—that is, Homer, Marge, Bart, Lisa and Maggie. “The Simpsons”, of course, is a satirical cartoon for adults. It is a depiction of middle class American lifestyle, and it makes humor out of our ways of life. It makes humor out of core truths of the human condition and core truths of human behavior. Some of us find “The Simpsons” quite funny. Others of us find it irrelevant, and still others of us are routinely offended by “The Simpsons”. I no longer watch it very often, but I did for a while.

I want to life up a prayer that Bart Simpson once gave. There is an episode that you can look for on You Tube if you are so interested where Bart, who is the young son with the spikey hair and a smart aleck attitude, was asked to give the dinner prayer. There was a family dinner there. There were actually some guests there. There was a special dinner, sort of like a Thanksgiving meal, so Bart was asked to give the blessing. Here is Bart’s blessing: “Dear God, we pay for all this stuff, so thanks for nothing”, and the response at the table is a shameful embarrassment where everyone looks down and looks away at the embarrassment of Bart’s prayer.

“The Simpsons” is funny because it pokes at some truths in our world, and the truth is that we live in a culture where the rhetoric in our culture is what I would call the rhetoric of “if...then”—if you do this, then you get that; if you go to college, then you get a job; if you work hard, then you get money; if you play by the rules, then you get rewarded. Now, this “if...then” culture is working less and less for fewer and fewer people, but we all still live by these ideas. We believe in an “if...then” type of world. We tend to legitimize this “if...then” type of world theologically by ancient statements.

A statement that was popularized by Benjamin Franklin says “God who helps those who help themselves”. This sentiment, this statement originally or sometime apparently said by Benjamin Franklin is, of course, more old, more ancient than Benjamin Franklin. It’s been around for a while, but it is not a sentiment that can be found anywhere in the Bible. In the Bible, this idea of God helping those who help themselves cannot be found.

There is a different sentiment in the Bible and I Kings 17, which Sue read (and I read again to the children), is a sentiment about a God who provides. God provides for those who cannot provide for themselves. As I mentioned in that passage, widows, orphans and immigrants are the chosen priority in scripture after scripture of this one God that we worship now. Widows, orphans and immigrants, of course, were the most vulnerable people in that world of the Bible. They were the destitute. The Bible says that God has some kind of affection for them and some kind of priority for them to take care of them. God provides for those who can’t take care of themselves.

This wonderful story is all about that. It is about a widow in Zarephath. I wanted to find out where Zarephath is. I was stunned when I Googled this morning. Zarephath is actually a township in New Jersey! I didn't know that, but, not only is it a township in New Jersey; it is also in modern day Lebanon. It is on the Mediterranean coast. What is important about the scripture in this land of Zarephath is that it is the land, not of Israel's God. It's not the land of Yahweh. It is the land of Baal. B-A-A-L. It is a foreign god in a foreign land, and here is this story about the God of Israel helping out this foreign worshipping widow, so it is, in the larger scale of things, a battle between Baal and Yahweh. Baal is a fertility god, who is going to rain down the rains for the harvest, but if you picked it up in the scripture, the rain has not been coming. It is, in fact, a drought that this widow is struggling with and all the people of that land. Their god of fertility and rain and harvest is not coming through for them. They are not getting the rain they need, so we have this battle between Yahweh and Baal. Of course, Yahweh, this God of Israel, is the God of provision. He is the God of grace, the God of covenant that is going to speak through Elijah and provide for this woman.

This woman is starving. She has barely enough meal. She has barely enough oil and barely enough water. She has barely enough of anything. If you read on in that story, you would read that her child is dying and her god can't do anything about her dying child, but along comes Elijah, the prophet of the true God, and this God is not limited by the "if...then" proposition. This God is not limited by human-created social and economic structures. This God is free. This God can do what this God wants to do. This God uses ravens, in the story just prior to the one that we read, to provide bread and meat to Elijah. The hitch with the ravens is that they are unclean beasts. They are unclean birds that the Israelites had said don't touch, don't get involved with ravens, and this God uses ravens, the unclean, to bring to Elijah what he needs, so this God can do whatever this God wants to do. God works through ravens. God works through this non-Israelite woman. This God works through this nation that is not of Israel's "kind", and this God provides for the starving widow. This God takes this little bit of oil that is left and this little bit of meal that is left and provides abundantly.

It challenges the reader, us, to think how do we believe our God operates. Does God operate in an "if...then" structure? Are the blessings of God contingent upon only how we act, or is this a God of overflowing oil and bread for those who need it? In the story about Elijah and the widow, this is about a God of miraculous provision. A God gives, and gives, and gives and gives what we need.

The church needs to struggle to think new about what God can actually do. What can God do with the church in this day? When the jars are running empty, when the meal is running out, when there is not much left to make loaves of bread, can God do something new with the church? Can God do something new with the land, with our land, with our nation, with our world? These stories are in the Bible for the express purpose, in our context, that we might believe that God is absolutely capable of miracles, that God can make something out of nothing, that God can make a new way out of no way, that God can see the little bit of meal that you have left, the little bit of oil that you have left, a little bit of cash that you have left in your budget and can take that and start something new. The church of Jesus Christ has to believe that we worship a God of abundant possibilities, a God of miraculous possibilities—not a God if "if...then"—if you do this then I will reward you. That's not the God of the Bible. The God who we worship is a God who is always doing something new at unexpected moments, and that is what this story is about. It's about this poor widow throwing in two coins and God saying "Halleluia! You have done what you need to do because you have lived with incredible faith and have given over your last two bits, and I will take those last two coins and do something powerful with those coins".

Consciously or unconsciously, we believe that what we have is because we have earned it. We are all people who, on some level, have adopted the prayer of Bart Simpson, but if we are honest, if we are people of faith, when we pray this coming Thanksgiving, our prayer will begin with something like acknowledging that we have nothing except by your grace. We have nothing without God. We have no future without a deep believe in this miraculous transforming power of God who takes nothing and

makes it into something. We are people of full jugs, full jars, full loaves, full life. This widow reminds us that, even in times of famine and drought, God is at work making something new. Thanks be to God, the God of abundance and prosperity. Amen.