

“Giving Hopefully”
November 10, 2024
Scripture: I Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

In 2003 the governor of Alabama, Bob Riley, a Republican who is a born-again evangelical, made it his mission to reform the Alabama tax code. At the time the state had the most regressive tax code in the country which resulted in very small revenue. That in turn led to Alabama rating at the bottom for education and healthcare in the country. At one point Riley said he was “tired of Alabama being first at things that are bad and last at things that are good.” He pointed out that the tax rate in Alabama was effectively 3% for the wealthiest citizens and 12% for the poorest.

Aside from reform being just good management, Riley came to it from the perspective of his faith. He said, “When I read the New Testament there are three things we’re asked to do: That’s love God, love each other, and take care of the least among us.” I remember reading about this back then and being impressed with how clearly he was able to apply Christian principles, the direct teachings of Jesus, to address a broken system that was doing a lot of harm to vulnerable people. So often, it seems that politicians use their faith in a cynical way to drum up support for their election but never apply it to create policy.

But using our principles to critique unjust systems is a practice that comes directly from the Bible. Every prophet in the Hebrew scriptures critiques the social and political system of their day from the perspective of Torah and the ethics it requires. When a king fails to live up to those ethics the prophet speaks out in the voice of God to hold the monarchy accountable. That’s what Elijah was doing that compelled him to announce the drought God would impose on Israel for King Ahab’s violations of Torah.

And it may be why God sends him outside of Israel to Zarephath to be fed by a widow who lives there. Zarephath is in the country of Sidon which is the home of Jezebel, King Ahab’s wife. So, Ahab has control of Sidon. Yet, during the drought there’s no relief provided for widows in this place the way Torah demands. So, Elijah goes to bring relief to this woman and her family. In other words, God shows up for someone outside Israel as a judgment on Israel’s king.

It’s a powerful moment in Elijah’s life, certainly, but I think it’s even more powerful for the widow he encounters. She has no attachment to Elijah’s God. She’s just trying to survive as long as she can with what little she has. Her plan, as we learn, is to cook up the last bit of meal she has left to make some cake for herself and her son, and then let nature take its course as they starve to death. Can you imagine how troubling it would be to have this stranger from Israel, the dominant country now, require her to bring him some food? She is remarkably polite with him, I think. Rather than refusing outright she tries to explain her circumstances. Elijah isn’t indifferent to that. He must realize how hard it is for her, and how she’s been abandoned by a system that’s supposed to look after her. So he makes her a promise: “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.”

From out of what little she has, all she has to live on, the widow gives hopefully to Elijah. She gives in hope that his words are true. She puts her trust in Elijah's God to provide what she and her child need to live. It's a turning point, I think, for both of them. For the widow, because, in this moment of trust she is given relief from her despair. She's no longer planning to die. The possibility of survival is opened to her. And for Elijah because now he knows something about Israel's God he hadn't realized before. The God of Israel is no respecter of borders and differences, but reaches out to all in need to rescue them and make them whole. It's in stories like this that we learn God is not confined to Israel but reaches across the barriers we construct to protect ourselves and our possessions.

But the provision God offers requires our cooperation. The commands of Torah, calling Israel to care for the widow and orphan and alien, can only be met through our actions on their behalf. God works through the efforts of people like Elijah. The psalm assigned in today's lectionary is Psalm 146. It says, in part: "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God...who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry....The Lord watches over the strangers; upholds the orphan and the widow." Torah provides the framework for the system that makes those things happen.

But when that system breaks down, people are forgotten; strangers, orphans and widows are left to fend for themselves. When Jesus warns about the scribes, he's pointing out how the system in Jerusalem has broken. There are good scribes in the gospels. Just before this scene with Jesus we heard about a scribe who came to ask him about the commandments. Jesus told that scribe he wasn't far from the kingdom of God. But there are scribes who were failing in their responsibilities. Scribes are legal experts, basically. They're the ones who interpret the commandments of Torah, so they have a lot of authority in a society where monitoring is required to ensure everyone is staying faithful. But Jesus describes some of them as hypocrites; the ones who like to go around in long robes and be greeted with respect. I think it's important to understand, he's not referring to all scribes as a class. There's an unfortunately placed comma in our translation that makes it seem that way. Jesus is talking about certain scribes; the ones who behave arrogantly. These are the ones who suck up all the oxygen with long prayers and devour widows' houses.

One of those widows might be the woman Jesus points to with her pair of copper coins for the treasury. The system has failed this woman. It shouldn't require her to give up all she has to live on. But there she is giving hopefully to the treasury. She's hoping for some relief. We usually think of this story as an example of personal piety, Jesus is holding her up as an example of sacrificial giving that we should emulate. That's a valid enough interpretation, but it's not the only one. I think it's just as valid to interpret it as a critique of the system. Jesus is saying, "There's something wrong with this picture." This woman should be able to give to the treasury without risking her livelihood.

Jesus' message in the gospels is not to tear down the system. He's not interested in creating a new religion to replace Judaism. Jesus is calling his followers to look critically at the system as it's practiced and find ways to bring it closer to God's intentions. The hope he offers isn't an escape from all of this; it's the possibility of making the system we have more just, more compassionate, more loving.

Christians have a long history of influencing governance. Like Governor Riley in Alabama, we're interested in seeing the governing system reflect our values. He does a great job, I think, of distilling those values to their essentials: Love God and each other, and take care of the least among us. How we do that will change depending on our circumstances, but at the very least it means looking critically at the system to see how it's failing and whom it's failing. Like Elijah we're called to step in on God's behalf and care for the vulnerable. That doesn't mean we have to be in charge, Elijah certainly wasn't, Jesus and his disciples certainly weren't, but we do need to speak up. We need to risk inserting ourselves in circumstances of injustice and calling on those in power to look after the vulnerable. We're called to give hopefully of our time and our status, of our power and privilege to insist on justice and compassion.

We do it hopefully but we realize it may not always work. Things didn't go so well for Elijah later on in his story. And Jesus' words occur just days before his crucifixion. And as for Alabama, things there didn't go as hoped either. The tax code in Alabama is part of its state constitution, so changing it requires a popular referendum. When that was held in 2003, under Riley, the lumber and agricultural industries spent millions in advertising against it. It was defeated by a 2 to 1 margin. The budget for the following year included a \$100 million cut to K-12 education. The poorest, most vulnerable people in Alabama were convinced to vote against their own interests, a dynamic we see happen all the time in our country.

Yet hope remains. There are still Christians in Alabama, working in multifaith, multiracial coalitions, to reform the tax system and who have made some incremental changes. Giving hopefully requires patience and determination and resilience. When setbacks cause us to stumble, we get back up and keep hope alive. Elijah meets the despair of the widow in Zarephath with God's promise of provision, giving her hope for tomorrow. Jesus teaches his disciples to look closely and critically at who benefits and who is hurt by a system meant to provide support for the vulnerable. This is our calling: stepping in where we can, calling out injustice where it happens, and giving of ourselves hopefully, in ways that reveal compassion, generosity and love. We give of ourselves in the knowledge that God isn't through with us even when it seems as if all is lost. We live in hope so God can continue to work through us to bring an end to fear and despair so a new day of justice, equity and peace can rise.

Amen