

It was just a little bit of bread.

There wasn't much substance to it at all. Some flour, a little oil to hold it together...it wasn't even very good bread. But it was all she had, and all she had to offer. She meant it for herself and her son, for a last meal there in the land of Baal-worshippers. She meant for them to eat it, and once it was gone, they would starve, this poor widow and her young son who had no one else to care for them, in the midst of a drought when they could not feed themselves.

And then along came a man...a prophet of Yahweh, of another God than the gods of her neighbors and countrymen. He was a stranger in that land, a foreigner, and had no right to ask for anything at all, and if he'd had good sense, would never have asked anything of this poor widow who was so clearly destitute. But he did ask...and what did he ask for? Water first, which was simple enough. But then he did it...he asked for bread. The only thing she had to give...the last thing she had left.

It was only a little bread Elijah wanted. But it was all she had left...for herself, for her son, for their lives. And Elijah wanted it all, he said, go ahead, bake the bread, give me some...it's only a little bit of bread.

She saw something in this man of God...heard something in his voice, perhaps, had a little intuition that in the presence of this ordinary

man, something extraordinary was about to happen. Somehow she believed his words: “Do not be afraid...you and your son will have enough to last until things get better.”

So she took her little bit of flour and mixed it with oil and lay it by the fire to bake. With this strange man in her house...strange in more ways than one, this God-touched fellow...she watched it rise, and brown, and lifted it to the table to cool, and finally they ate.

It was only a little bread, but how it must have tasted like ashes and turned to glue in her mouth as she watched Elijah eat bread taken away from her, from her son...the last of the last she had. Even though something had compelled her to believe Elijah’s words and the promise of a God she did not know, still she must have watched with fear, and maybe a little resentment as the last crumbs vanished...and probably not much hope.

But the next day came, and maybe just out of habit she went to the flour jar and checked it, and found enough to bake again. She went to the oil jug and found enough there, and so they ate again. And in that smell of baking bread, this nameless widow and her son found hope, and wholeness, and the holiness of God. In that meal, and for many days to come, they found life in the bread baked of flour and oil that God provided.

It was just a little bread, but on something so simple, so insignificant, life and hope were sustained. Well, it might have been as simple and insignificant as bread, if we didn't know Who else was involved...and that means that something as simple as oil and flour, as bread or wine or water, becomes something else entirely in the presence of God. That is what United Methodists call a sacrament: a moment with God in which something ordinary is transformed by the power and presence of God into something extraordinary. As flour and oil became bread day after day in that widow's home, bread became life as her family was sustained during a time of drought and famine. It wasn't just a little bread at all...it was the bread of life in that little home, it was the love and grace of God in a time of fear and loneliness, it was the presence of God to a woman and boy who thought their lives were empty and lost.

It's starting not to look so much like a little bread, isn't it?

We want our lives to be simple...to be look at conflict and fear in our lives and in our world and to be able to say some little something that will make them manageable, understandable...to feel like we know what's going on and how to act and what to think and feel. Then something comes along: a tragedy in our lives, loss, pain...emotional and spiritual drought that leaves us looking at our lives and wondering how something

we thought was simple got so complicated, how we managed to lose our way. We realize again that the “real world” is out there, and it’s tough, and while we have Heaven to look forward to, in the meantime, here-and-now is where we live. And sometimes here-and-now turns out not to be so great.

It’s in these not-so-great moments that something like just a little bread turns out to be so much more...can show us the love and presence and mercy of God in the middle of whatever we’re going through. Elijah asked a great deal of that widow and her son: a share in all they had left. But he also offered a great deal: bread to sustain and save their lives, hope and faith to sustain and save their spirits, the grace of God to two people who thought they’d been forgotten. Where do we find bread in our lives when we need it? Where do we find it when we don’t need it for ourselves, but to offer to others? How do we share bread, life, with those in need?

On the altar before us are simple gifts, presented to God and to us for the strengthening of our lives, faith, and ministry. There are multiple offerings on the table today: our weekly offering, a gift from us in recognition of all God’s many gifts to us, a part of our participation in the work of God in this community through this congregation called Ann Street. But that’s not all that’s on the table today. Today there’s a white cloth, and under it a cup, a pitcher, and a plate, an offering of a simple meal, of bread

and what we call wine, (although we know it to be of the unfermented, “Welch’s” type variety). What does it mean? What good can this meal do us? After all, it’s just a little bread...very little, in fact. How can this snack we call a feast change us, and change others?

Here’s where that sacrament stuff comes in again. It **is** just a little bread, apart from the presence of God in Jesus Christ. We don’t have to understand how he’s present in this simple little meal; it’s enough for us to know that he is...and that we are called to share it among ourselves and with others. We don’t have to know exactly how it is that this bread, which looks for all the world like a loaf of homemade sourdough bread from the kitchen of a very generous church member, turns out to be what Jesus called “the bread of life,” but God calls us to know that this meal, this little bit of bread, is somehow life, and hope, and grace to us. Another meaning to “sacrament” is mystery, and it is indeed a mystery to us how so much meaning and so many gifts could come to us in something so simple as bread, and that’s all right. It is a mystery, too, how the widow of Zarepath’s jar of flour and jug of oil always had just enough...but we know too the answer to the mystery: it is God, reaching out through ordinary things to make our lives extraordinary.

So here we come, like that widow, with areas of drought and dryness in our own lives, and living in a world full of people who are dying for just a little bread. Here we come to this table, to this meal, to this cup and place, this bread and wine. Here we come, and some part of us, deep in our hearts, should know that after this meal we are about to share together, nothing will ever be quite the same again.

You see, I don't really believe that after the drought and famine were over, that widow and her son just went about their lives like nothing had changed. They had had an encounter with God through Elijah that restored life to them when they thought it was lost, and had gained more than just flour and oil and the ability to make bread. In those days when the widow housed Elijah, something terrible happened: her son died. Rather than chasing off after the gods of her neighbors, she turned to Elijah, who had shown her the true God, and this time, she demanded life...and her son was restored to her.

It looked like just a little bread. It was made in the same way as it had been made for generations: a little flour and a little oil, baked on a stone heated in the fire, just enough to sustain life. It should have been just a little bread: nothing more than nutrition to survive one more day, until it was gone. That first meal she shared with Elijah should have been the last,

except that something amazing and unexpected happened: God showed up, and the bread suddenly became something more, and for that widow, nothing was ever the same again.

So here we come, to this symbolic meal, to this small feast, to this time at the altar with just a little bread. Or is it? As we pray and as we eat, Jesus Christ is made known to us in ways we don't and can't understand. It is a mystery...and one we share with Christians the world over and throughout time. It's time for something extraordinary to take place here in ordinary bread and wine, in ordinary men and women. An end to drought and famine in our lives, new life, a renewed spirit...it's amazing what God can do with just a little bread.