

Sunday, June 5, 2016

I Kings 17:8-24

Luke 7:11-17

God's Surprising Spirit

A couple lived near the ocean and used to walk the beach a lot. One summer they noticed a girl who was at the beach pretty much every day. She wasn't unusual, nor was the travel bag she carried, except for one thing. She would approach people who were sitting on the beach, glance around, then speak to them. Generally, the people would respond negatively and she would wander off, but occasionally someone would nod and there would be a quick exchange of money for something she carried in her bag. The couple assumed she was selling drugs and debated calling the cops, but since they didn't know for sure they just continued to watch her.

After a couple of weeks the wife asked, "Honey, have you ever noticed that she only goes up to people with boom boxes and other electronic devices?" He hadn't and said so. Then she said, "Tomorrow I want you to get a towel and our big radio and go lie out on the beach. Then we can find out what she's really doing."

Well, the plan went off without a hitch, and the wife was almost hopping up and down with anticipation when she saw the girl talk to her husband and then leave. The man walked up the beach and met his wife at the road. "Well, is she selling drugs?" she asked excitedly.

"No, she's not." he said, enjoying this probably more than he should have. "Well, what is it, then?" his wife fairly shrieked. The man grinned and said. "Her name is Sally and she's selling batteries."

"Batteries?" cried the wife. "Yes," he replied. "Sally sells C cells by the Seashore."

You didn't expect that ending did you? Many of us might have wondered what Sally was really doing but this is the point- we need to go beyond what is expected and take the surprise for what it is or what it could be.- a joke a laugh. And for some people receiving a surprise laugh is very important and necessary when facing difficult situations, or even difficult times.

Our two stories today don't seem to have much in common but they do because they are about people of faith and the life they are living and how God's Spirit surprises people and how his Spirit continues to surprise and .

In our reading from I Kings, the prophet Elijah has just completed his time in the wilderness where God tested him until the time the brook dried up and there was a drought in the land. The word of God came to him and told him to go to Zarephath where he would meet a woman who would feed him. He went and met this woman who was a widow and he asked for water and bread. She told him that she really couldn't afford to give him the bread because she had only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in her jug. She was just preparing the last meal for her and her son because she anticipates that they will soon die without food.

Elijah then told her not to be afraid. But to do what he asked. She was to return home, make him a small loaf and then made something for both she and her son. God told him that "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord gives rain on the land." So she went away and did as Elijah asked. And when Elijah went to her home there was food every day for him, and for the woman and her boy. The flour and oil containers did not run out and the woman and her son lived.

Maybe this is not the ending you thought would happen but it is a story that shows us that the prophet needed to have faith in God so that there would be food enough for him and the woman who opened her home to him. No doubt she had food when others did not. If God had not provided for this woman what would have happened to her? They would both have died as she has no husband to look after her even through the drought. And it was Elijah who simply said, Don't be afraid.

This past week I attended LC Annual Meeting which has led me to times of prayer and reflection about our United Church and what is to come, Glenwood Church and the roles of presbytery and conference. But what struck me not as a total surprise but a great reminder is that this conference of people is also my church family. During the retirees/ Jubilands dinner I had the privilege of sitting with two Jubilands- both celebrating 50 years of ministry and a retiree who was completing 15 years of ministry. I had glanced around the table and knew these particular individuals as we had shared spiritual moments together in the past. I had shared in the first covenanting service of the Retiree 15 years ago; shared in ministry down the road of one of the jubilands and connected with the other jubiland through her work in the conference office earlier in my ministry. Was this a surprise—to be able to sit together and talk about their various ministries or had the Spirit led us to be at this table together?

Soon after I came home last week I received information about our friend Mary and her situation. I spent many hours with her and her family this week. And of course was surprised and upset as many of you have been. This is my church family too. And this week God's Spirit was moving amongst us all. God heard our cries, saw our tears and God called her home and we are grieving.

But God's spirit does not stop moving about and surprising us all. For even in the few hours after Mary's memorial service took place, God was bringing together people who probably didn't know that they were involved in the ministry of SACU until they met at the church. Some people might call this coincidence.. I don't think so- God's Spirit moves and surprises us always. We just need to realize that God is in control; God is the one who is looking after us; and God is the one with view of the bigger picture.

The story we shared from Luke 7 tells of one of the miracles Jesus performed. Two processions were taking place. Jesus followed by his disciples and a large crowd were going into the community of Nain. At the same time another procession is leaving the community and heading to the burial place. Pall bearers are carrying the body of a boy. Family members and mourners are following the pall bearers. What will happen at the gate of Nain? Which procession will give way to the other?

Just then Jesus looked up in into the eyes of the mother and Jesus' heart went out to her and he said, "Don't cry." He then learned that this woman was a widow and the deceased was her only son. What would this woman do with no son, no husband and deep grief around her and the community? Jesus went up to the coffin as the pallbearers stood still. Jesus spoke, "Young man, I say to you, get up." The man sat up and began to talk- he had been given back to his mother. This is often where many people stop reading.

But it is not just the miracle that Jesus shared with this family that we have this story. The surprise part of this story is what is stated by the people—"God has come to help his people". Jesus knew that this woman's future without her son and husband would have been bleak, she might have receive some support of her community but her existence would be as if she were no one and this was the condition of many widows at that time. Jesus sees in her a need for him to help. And so he did help. He raised her son from death.

This news about Jesus spread very quickly throughout Judea and the surrounding community. And the people were now realizing that God has come to help his people. Jesus became the Word made flesh to help us and the Spirit continues to do so each and every day; no matter what occurs- challenges, changes, positive negative and God still says. Don't be afraid. Don't cry. I am with you always.

Jesus is the Son of God who came to seek, save and help people. Jesus came to have the last word. Jesus is life and He came so that people should have life and have it to the full. But are we enabling our 'full life' to happen, that is are we letting God's Spirit in only a little bit?

Think about this we are all going to die—100% chance—yet those who believe and trust God’s Spirit to move us and who believe and live as Christ teaches will receive the gift and promise of eternal life. Those who believe receive God’s love which surrounds, protects, embraces and lifts us. It’s all around us.

Years ago a man was traveling by ship with his young daughter across the ocean. Earlier that particular Sunday he had preached a sermon about God's love. It had been a very difficult service to preach, because he was newly widowed. He was standing against the rail of the ship, looking out at the vast and magnificent ocean, when his daughter asked him if God loved them as much as they had loved her late mother.

"Of course He does," answered her father. "There is absolutely nothing bigger or more powerful and all-consuming than God's love for us. It's the biggest thing there is!" The little girl pressed on for more information, wanting to know exactly how big God's love was. Finally her father with great tenderness said, "Well, look across the sea as far as you can. Look up and down and all around. God's love stretches around to cover all of that; above the blue sky and deeper than the deepest part of the ocean underneath us." The little girl pondered for a minute and replied, "And to think Daddy, we're right in the middle of it."

And we are. We're right in the middle of God's love. We don't need a miracle to tell us that. But from time to time God’s Spirit will surprise and remind each of us again that we are not alone. We live in God’s world and nothing will separate us from His love.

God’s Spirit leads us but we must be open to receive His message and be willing to be in the middle of this love as God’s faithful and committed people.

LET US PRAY

Holy God receive our hearts anew as your Spirit moves amongst us now and speaks to our hearts. Show us your love and surprise us with new hope. We ask as we share with you our thoughts and feelings in this moment. SILENCE Amen.