

2 Kings 4:42-44 Bill Uetracht 7.25.24

A month or so ago, I went to the local bike shop, seeking help with a flat tire. I was hoping that they could replace my punctured tube quickly. It was the second flat that I had had on that tire in a couple of days. I was a little irritated and didn't want to hear that I would have to come back in a few days to get my bike. The young man who waited on me was warm and clearly was intent on responding to my need. He joked with me, started working on my tire, talking with me as he worked. Quickly he got the job done. And I handed him my credit card, and he said, "Forget it. This one's on us."

"Wow," I was moved. Not simply because I am a cheapskate and love it when I don't have to spend money, although that is true. No, it was much more than that. Actually, I was moved by the whole experience. The whole experience was one of generosity, and generosity has this way of buoying me up, making me feel better about life and the world. After Matt said, "Forget it; this one's on us," I said to him, "You know, I wonder if people in retail realize how much warmth, generosity, and good customer service can do for those of us who are the recipients of their service. A good experience, I said, can affect the rest of the day. After all, earlier in the day we met with a crabby customer service provider who didn't seem at all interested in helping us. Earlier in the day, we yelled at the recorded messages on the phone, saying, "I just want to talk to a real person; I am just trying to set up a simple appointment with the doctor." Earlier in the day our anger was fanned. Our frustration was heightened. Energy was drained from us. Life was experienced as anything but generous. Lack of generosity takes the generosity out of us. But generosity begets generosity.

We have a marvelous, folklorish story out of Second Kings today that points to the significance of generosity. This story is about the man of God named Elisha. Second Kings has many stories about this hero.

Today we hear that Elisha is visited by a man from Baal-shalishah. We aren't given a name for the man, but we know where he is from, a foreign city. The first part of the name for the city, Baal, suggests that this is a Canaanite city, a city where the foreign god Baal is worshiped and followed. So, it is a foreigner, probably a pagan foreigner, who shows up at Elisha's place with gifts—gifts of food, twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain.

I have found that some of the greatest hospitality and generosity that I have ever experienced have come from what would have been for me foreigners. When Bev and I were in college we befriended a Palestinian couple from Saudi Arabia. Oh my gosh were they generous and hospitable! They couldn't feed us enough when we were at their home. Both Paula and I could tell you that some of the greatest hospitality that we ever experienced occurred when we were in Palestine. The Palestinians knew how to make us feel special and welcome. At a time when foreigners are often viewed with suspicion, we might want to be surprised by what they have to offer to us.

It's food that Elisha gets from a foreigner. Perhaps this was some kind of offering given to religious leaders. Who knows for sure? It is said to be a first fruits offering. This offering Elisha suggests be shared with others. "Give it to the people and let them eat," Elisha says. "You gave it to me. I want it shared with others." Elisha wants to pay it forward, as we say these days. He experienced generosity, and he desires to be generous.

Now, the foreigner is not so sure about Elisha's invitation. How can this food feed 100 people. Maybe the foreign man is ticked off because he thinks that Elisha alone should get the gift. Or maybe, and I think this is more likely the case, he's overwhelmed by the task. There are 100 people out here. How in the heck are we going to feed them with this little bit of food? There isn't enough.

“There isn’t enough” is frequently the cry of people. Oh, there is not going to be enough food at the potluck. There’s only so much to go around. If we don’t grab ours now, we might not get anything, especially those coveted Brussel sprouts that we have been looking forward to. “Not enough to go around” is our cry. This is the sentiment, by the way, that creates sibling rivalry, causes us to be suspicious of foreigners, makes us crabby when we think that other people get things that we don’t. Not enough to go around!

And yet Elisha repeats his command, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” There *is* enough to go around. The world isn’t ruled by scarcity. The world is ruled by abundance. And if you don’t believe that, pay attention to Jesus. He’s got 5000 to feed, not 100 like Elisha. And he has less to work with. He has only five barley loaves, not twenty, and a couple of fish. And miraculously, these gifts are enough. In fact, they are so enough that there are leftovers. Jesus tells his disciples to gather up the fragments, the leftovers, so that nothing may be lost. You see, there are a whole lot more people who need to be fed. Jesus, God has his eyes on the whole creation, on everybody. After all, God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that the whole world might know that there is more than enough to go around. God is not stingy. What rules the world is not stinginess, but abundant grace and love.

The Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 145, speaks of this grace and love in words that can be described as a creedal statement for Israel: “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” This is the bottom-line truth of Israel’s faith. God is gracious. God is not a crabby, stingy autocrat who only has enough love for a limited number of people. God is a gracious God whose love is extended to all.

You and I live in light of generosity and abundance for everything and everybody. When I hear that, when I trust that, I can’t help but be

generous myself. Generosity begets generosity. As generosity flows to me, I want to be like Elisha and share with others. “Put that food in front of the people.” There will be enough for them. And in fact, there will be leftovers, according to the word of the Lord.

You and I here at First Lutheran are truly an abundantly blessed community. This is a community of such vitality and energy. I have been asked on several occasions what I think makes that possible. And I could mention many things, but I am convinced that generosity of spirit, compassion, and money is a primary key to vital congregational life. Now I realize that there are no guarantees, especially these days. These are tough days to do church. But a sure-fire way to kill a church is to practice stinginess, stinginess of mind, heart and wallet. Vital churches often have people with open hearts and open minds. These people are not keeping track or keeping score. They are open to the brokenness of human beings. They don't need to stand in judgment of people who are different than they or perhaps not as talented as they. They root people on. They rejoice with people who get good stuff, even if they don't.

Vital churches are filled with people who realize that the church exists not simply for its own kind and its own sake. Yes, we want to take care of our own, but if we are only taking care of our own, we will collapse in on ourselves. Vital churches open their doors and share their buildings. Vital churches share their money, and not just with themselves. We know a bigger world out there. We also know the truth of the generosity of God, which is focused on all of creation and all the world. Vital churches ask about how we can help the world. Vital churches take the gifts of twenty barley loaves and fresh ears of grain and place them before the people, trusting that there will be more than enough, according to the word of the Lord.

Experiencing the generosity of the man of God at the bike store changed my day last month. And I think I can say that it changed the way I interacted with people for the rest of the day. What if you knew and trusted that at the center of life is an abundant generosity? If you did, all of life would be changed. Generosity has this way of transforming everything. Generosity begets generosity which begets more generosity which begets even more generosity. And when generosity flows, generosity rules. And when generosity rules, life isn't about crabbiness, resentment, stinginess. How little can I tip and get away with it? How unstained can we keep the carpet? How do I make sure that that other person, especially that foreigner, doesn't get something that is I deserve? No, when generosity rules, the calculators are thrown away. Crabbiness and resentment find themselves being replaced by joy and freedom. And honestly, it's a life of joy that I want to live.