



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Together”

1 Kings 17:8-24

February 3, 2019

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Broad Street Presbyterian Church and Bethany Presbyterian Church

Columbus, OH

### Bethany Presbyterian Church 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

#### Joint Worship Service for Broad Street Presbyterian Church and Bethany Presbyterian Church

Working on this sermon got me thinking about famous partnerships – pairs of people who always go together. Here are just a few on my list:

Mickey and Minnie  
Adam and Eve  
Bert and Ernie  
Sonny and Cher  
Serena and Venus  
Beauty and the Beast  
Thelma and Louise  
Tom and Jerry  
Jack and Jill  
Michael Jordan and Scotty Pippen  
Batman and Robin

This morning I want to add another set of names to that list: Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. They aren't as famous as the names that I just mentioned. But maybe they should be. They have a strong productive collaboration. At the same time, they are unlikely partners. We don't know her name. She is identified only by her economic status. She's a widow, living in a time of famine. She's a pagan who worships a god named Baal.

And then there's Elijah, a famous prophet of the Lord. It is the Lord who instructs him to seek out the widow.

When Elijah first meets her, he asks her for some water and then for some bread. The widow patiently explains that she is down to her last provisions – a handful of meal and a little oil. She is preparing a final meal, a last supper, for herself and her son.

Elijah tells the widow not to worry, that his God will provide for her. She has no experience or knowledge of this God. The man telling her these things is completely unfamiliar. Yet, she uses what little food she has to feed this stranger. She takes a risk – a huge risk – and offers hospitality to a foreigner.

She feeds Elijah that day and then invites him to be a guest in her home. She, her son and Elijah live in her little house and God makes sure that they have enough meal and oil to survive.

More sermons can be found online at <https://subsplash.com/broadstreetpresbyterian/sermons>

It's such a lovely and inspiring story of faith and trust and hope that crosses ethnic and religious boundaries. That's the first half of the story; the second part of the story is a little less inspiring. The widow's son gets sick – very sick – and he dies. She had dedicated all of her energy and resources to keeping him alive. What does the widow do when he dies? She blames Elijah, her guest. "It's your fault that he's dead," she says. "Your God killed my boy," she says.

It's an old story.

Things go wrong. A child dies. Someone must be to blame. It must be someone's fault. Accusations fly. Someone must be to blame.

When things go wrong it's easy to place the blame on the stranger, the newcomer, the newest kid on the block. It's such a stretch to welcome the stranger into our home, our community, our schools, our nation. When things go wrong (and they always do), it's tempting to blame the one that has just arrived among us.

I was a young adult participating in a Christian volunteer program that included about 10 others. We shared our common living space. We ate together. We worshipped together. We regularly met for Bible study and prayer. I met some amazing people and had some amazing experiences but overall... it was hard. But manageable until Fran moved in. She was... challenging. A poor listener. Messy. Immature. Poor social skills. The rest of us didn't like her. And oh so quickly we started blaming everything on her. Food disappearing from the shared fridge? Must be Fran. Someone left the front door unlocked. Must be Fran. Dishes unwashed. Must be Fran. She was a convenient scapegoat.

It's an old story.

Maybe you know this story all too well. Maybe you've been the newcomer, the latest arrival, the new kid on the block – and you know what it's like to be excluded, distrusted, misinterpreted, blamed.

It's an old story.

And it's a current story. It's easy to make connections between this story and our present situation. When things go wrong in this country, it is easy to blame the stranger, the newcomer, the newest kids on the block. Elijah wouldn't be surprised at the current debate over immigration reform. There is intense disagreement in this country about how to move forward in respect to the millions of undocumented people currently living in the United States. We can't even agree on the vocabulary. The words we choose to describe those among us: immigrant, refugee, unauthorized migrant, undocumented worker, illegal alien – say a lot about where we stand in this debate. The debate, at times, is ugly. The stakes are high.

It is the same in Elijah's day and age. When the boy dies and his mother blames him, Elijah has a choice to make. He can walk away: mumbling his condolences and then quickly leaving town. Instead, he carries the boy to the upper room of the house. And then Elijah asks for the impossible – for God to give back the life of the child. And that's what happens.

It's the second miracle of the story. The first miracle is when the widow makes the decision to share her food and her home with Elijah. This second miracle is possible only because of the first.

Do you see now why Elijah and the widow deserve to be on any list of famous partnerships? They are a model for interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural exchange. The widow and the prophet spend little or no time talking about theological or cultural differences. They don't debate the fine points of worshipping Yahweh vs. worshipping Baal. They are too busy trying to survive, getting by in a time of famine. They live and struggle

side by side. So when the widow's son is dying, Elijah doesn't see a pagan boy. He sees a part of his family, a piece of his heart.

I've always wondered what the neighbors think about these two. "I can't believe she took in one of those Israelites. Can you imagine?" And when word gets back to Israel of whom Elijah is hanging out with, I'm betting the reaction is strong and negative. But, as time goes on, there are fewer and fewer people to disapprove. Because they are dying off in the famine, while Elijah and the widow and her son survive.

If we want to survive, we have to work together. It's just that simple. If we want to survive, we have to work together. That is God's way.

According to this story, God's hands are all over these kind of partnerships. God is the one who puts Elijah and the widow together in the first place. And every step of the way God is there to fill up their storehouse. Providing oil and meal. Constantly replenishing the supply of that which we need the most.

According to the Bible, God encourages and blesses the most unlikely partnerships. If you think I'm stretching, making too big a deal about this one little story, let's flip ahead some pages in the Bible – to the Gospel of Luke, chapter four, at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Jesus is searching for words to convey to the hometown crowd what he's about, what matters to him, what matters to God. This is the story that he claims as his own. He tells them this story about how Elijah goes to the widow of Zarephath – this pagan woman – and how together they survive. Together, they are blessed. Together they are given new life.

Jesus' audience finds this idea so threatening, so unimaginable that they run Jesus out of town. Nothing about this path is easy. Not in Elijah's day. Not in Jesus' day. And not in ours. It is hard to imagine that God loves and claims people who are dramatically different from us. It is so hard to imagine that God wants us to be in partnership with people who see the world dramatically different from us. But – according to the Bible – this is the way to survive. It's hard and it is difficult, but this is how we survive difficult times. If we want to survive and prosper on this planet, we will have to figure out a way to do it together.

Take the current situation in the nation of Sudan. For the past six weeks, thousands of Sudanese youth have been protesting the regime of long time ruler Omar al-Bashir. Half of the country's population is under the age of nineteen and they are tired of the corruption, the lack of jobs and food. In the past, al-Bashir has pitted the ethnic Arabs of Sudan's north against the black Africans of the south and west. But the youth movement is not falling for that old trick and it is made up of Arabs and blacks, united in their opposition to a corrupt ruler. The youth of Sudan have figured something out.<sup>1</sup>

Together we survive. Together we are blessed. Together we are given new life.

I'm talking about us – the present and future members of our two communities of faith.

I'm talking about us – all the people living in this country – 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generation Americans, new immigrants, refugees.

I'm talking about all the people of this world – African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Central and South American – Christians, atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, all of us...

Together we survive. Together we are blessed. Together we are given new life. God gives us new life. Together.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Week*, February 1, 2019, p. 9.