

MESSAGE – Phoenicia  
September 3, 2023  
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SCRIPTURE            1 Kings 17:7-24

<sup>7</sup> Some time later the brook dried up because there had been no rain in the land. <sup>8</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: <sup>9</sup> "Go at once to Zarephath in the region of Sidon and stay there. I have directed a widow there to supply you with food." <sup>10</sup> So he went to Zarephath. When he came to the town gate, a widow was there gathering sticks. He called to her and asked, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" <sup>11</sup> As she was going to get it, he called, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." <sup>12</sup> "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die." <sup>13</sup> Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. <sup>14</sup> For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD sends rain on the land.'" <sup>15</sup> She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So there was food every day for Elijah and for the woman and her family. <sup>16</sup> For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry, in keeping with the word of the LORD spoken by Elijah. <sup>17</sup> Some time later the son of the woman who owned the house became ill. He grew worse and worse, and finally stopped breathing. <sup>18</sup> She said to Elijah, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" <sup>19</sup> "Give me your son," Elijah replied. He took him from her arms, carried him to the upper room where he was staying, and laid him on his bed. <sup>20</sup> Then he cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, have you brought tragedy even on this widow I am staying with, by causing her son to die?" <sup>21</sup> Then he stretched himself out on the boy three times and cried out to the LORD, "LORD my God, let this boy's life return to him!" <sup>22</sup> The LORD heard Elijah's cry, and the boy's life returned to him, and he lived. <sup>23</sup> Elijah picked up the child and carried him down from the room into the house. He gave him to his mother and said, "Look, your son is alive!" <sup>24</sup> Then the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD from your mouth is the truth."

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Seems in every culture and time and generation, there are insiders and outsiders

The world is made up these distinctions

"insiders" is the attitude a group of people have that there are some people that belong and are due the benefits and blessings of being an insider

"outsiders" is the attitude a group of people that there are people outside the group for one reason or another that are not worthy of the benefits and blessings

We see this in school

We see it in politics

Even in church/religious communities

And sometimes we are taken by surprise when outsiders get treated like insiders.

I watched it happen in high school

There was a freshman who always got made fun of

Picked on; laughed at.

He was an outsider: awkward, not cool, didn't belong

And then one day one of the popular juniors did something. He was an athlete, an insider, he "belonged"; was called "lord of the halls" and on that day he stepped in on behalf of the freshman.

Talked to him like he belonged.

He changed the dynamic of how the insiders saw and treated that freshman. And those who used to pick on him began to treat him differently.

We can have such strong preconceived notions about who is on God's "insider" group and "outsider" group that it can be surprising when God operates like the "lord of the halls".

And it can challenge us to change how we see each other and treat one another.

It is what happened in our next and last destination of Phoenicia.

Phoenicia is an area to the north of Israel and along the coast line including cities such as Zarephath, Sidon and Tyre. It's people are descendants of the Canaanites who lived in the "promised land" before the Israelites entered in after conquering Jericho and crossing the Jordan river.

They had a different religion

They worshipped gods that were not the God of Israel.

Faithful Israelites might consider them outsiders because they were not God's chosen people; they were people who didn't belong.....and perhaps there was the belief that God wouldn't act there or in their favor.

Until God interfered in all those assumptions.

Israel, the insider was afflicted with a famine....

And it was with the outsiders that the prophet Elijah was to find God's presence and grace during that famine.

That time together challenged them both.

Elijah had to believe and trust in God's direction

The widow of Zarephath experienced a growing faith in the Elijah's God.

Together they learned abundance in the midst of scarcity – a blessing from God.

Together they had to come before God to pray for the son's healing.

Their time together - those distinctions of insider and outsider must have become blurred.

Even when those distinctions try to be defined again....

It is in Phoenicia that we discover how God will not be boxed into those assumptions that we make about God (the assumptions that God blessed one people over and against another.

Let's listen to another story that takes place hundreds of years later in Phoenicia:

SCRIPTURE            Mark 7:24-30

<sup>24</sup> Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.<sup>[a]</sup> He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. <sup>25</sup> In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet. <sup>26</sup> The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

<sup>27</sup> "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs." <sup>28</sup> "Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." <sup>29</sup> Then he told her, "For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."

<sup>30</sup> She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

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Jesus' statement is what always trips me up  
Because it seems like even Jesus has bought into the whole insiders and outsiders distinctions with his statement:

"it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs"

Now a couple of things about this:

In his term for dogs, it means a household pet...

Which means that he isn't saying that some people don't belong in the household...they do; they have a place in the household of God.

It means that there is a priority of mission (first the Jews then the Gentiles.....and I think there's important reasoning for that)

It does seem like an awkward conversation in which we are unsure if she needs to be challenged in her faith or if Jesus needs to be challenged in his mission priorities.

I don't think either is the case honestly

Because she came to him in faith

And if Jesus had such strong mission priorities, why did he travel to that region in the first place?

Perhaps they were reliving the Elijah/widow of Zarephath story....

Nevertheless, the dialogue serves to remind everyone of the broadness of God's grace.

I have learned this Phoenician lesson over and over again through the years.

Typically whenever I do a funeral for people who don't have a church home.....there's an assumption of no faith which is completely untrue.....

And it has challenged me

Like the words of Jesus challenged listeners long ago:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. <sup>14</sup>But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you.

Having an insider label doesn't really matter in the eyes of God.....

What matters is what is in the heart and if the heart is moved by God.

It is what happens in Phoenicia – in outsider territory....that we learn about what true faith and trust and belief looks like.

And it's why we celebrate an open table.....