

Northeastern Iowa Synod Assembly

June 9, 2013

1 Kings 17: 7-24

Herbert W. Chilstrom

*Elijah, you must be some kind of lunatic. You come into my village of Zarephath unannounced. You see me picking up a few sticks and ask me for a drink of water. I'm a fairly young widow and people tell me I'm quite attractive. I think I know where this conversation is leading. Then you ask me to bake you a small bread cake. I tell you I have only a half-cup of flour left in my house – only enough for my son and me to eat before we die. Then you get really ridiculous. You ask me to take that meager bit of flour, bake a bread cake and give you the first bite. You tell me that if I do my son and I will never go hungry again. And I'm supposed to believe you. Well I wish you'd just leave town, drop dead and never bother me again.*

Tell me honestly. Don't you like my version of the story better than the one in the Bible? Don't you think my account is more realistic than the one back there in 1 Kings?

The problem, of course, is that the other version *is* in the Bible and I'm expected to preach on it this morning.

Possibly the best way to get at it is to fast-forward several centuries and meet another lunatic. His name is Jesus of Nazareth. He also comes unannounced into cities and villages, down to the sea shore and along the river valley. He says to one man, "Leave that table. Leave all that money. Come and follow me." To several fishermen he says, "Leave that boat and your nets. Don't try to sell them. Come and follow me. I know you're worried about what you'll eat and what you'll wear. Don't worry. Seek first my kingdom and all these things will be yours as well."

I've had many mentors over the course of my life. One of them was Dr. Harold Floreen. He taught biblical literature for many years at our Lutheran seminary in Canada. In the early 1970s he retired and moved with his wife to St. Peter, Minnesota where I was serving as a young pastor. We had many wonderful conversations. One day he said to me, "Herb, have you ever noticed that whenever Jesus called someone to a new and deeper relationship with him it almost always involved their possessions?" The lights went on. Of course, it's everywhere. When Zachaeus climbs down from the tree he gives half of all he has for the poor. And on the negative side, the rich young ruler, who seems to want a more satisfying life, goes away sad because he can't part with his wealth.

And it's embedded in the parables as well. The Good Samaritan not only risks his life, but he offers to pay for whatever it costs to help the beaten man. And then he adds that if he needs long-term care he'll cover that as well. And on the negative side you have that parable about the

wealthy farmer. His spread was like one of those Iowa farms with its rich soil. He thinks he's all set for a very secure future. Then comes that saddest of all verses in the New Testament. "Tonight," the Lord says, "you will die. And then whose will all these things belong to??"

I'm so grateful I learned about generous giving when I was a young lad. I grew up in the most ordinary of families. We children were expected to go to Sunday school and to be confirmed. I detested confirmation. I could think of all kinds of things I'd rather do for two hours on a Saturday morning – whatever sport was in season or a part-time job to earn money.

As my day of confirmation approached, I had a speech all prepared to deliver to my parents. "All right," mother and dad, "I went to Sunday school. I even went to junior choir (which I hated more than confirmation). I've now been confirmed. Next Sunday I'll get up and go to church if I feel like it. But I won't if I don't feel like it."

About two months before that day of Confirmation my friends were talking about going to Bible camp. The Bible part didn't interest me in the least. But when I realized that *girls* from other towns would be there my interest quickened and I signed up. That week became a major turning point in my life. Now the same Gospel I had heard for years became very personal. The Good News that God loved me exactly as I was came to life in me. Pre-seminary counselors from Gustavus Adolphus College were with us in the boys' cabins. Their strong witness impressed me deeply.

I came home from camp a different young lad. I never delivered that speech to my parents. Instead, I began to read my Bible every day. At times it was rather boring. But over and over something would leap off the page and I would say, "This is exactly what I needed today." I joined the adult choir. What a pleasure to mix my changing voice with the deep basses and blend it with the others to praise God. I became the "unpaid youth director" for the congregation, urging my peers to get involved in all kinds of activities.

It was about a year later that I happened upon a pamphlet that suggested that some believers got great pleasure out of giving ten percent of everything they earned to the church and other good causes. It was called "tithing." My first thought was that this might be a good thing to do once I had a steady income. But for now I needed to save every dime if I wanted to go to college.

But then I thought to myself: "This is about faith and trust." So I started to tithe. And I kept right on doing it through high school and college.

When I met that special farmer's daughter from South Dakota and we decided to get married, I learned that she came from a family that tithed. We decided to do the same in our own home. At first we hit a blip. We thought that we better make certain we had enough to pay for seminary costs, the rent and the grocery bill before we tithed. If there was enough left at the end of the month, we would give ten percent. But we quickly came to our senses. No, it must come off the top as the first gift.

In our first parish we did the same. Folks were surprised the young pastor could give so much. We did the same though a decade as a low-paid professor with three small children. As income expanded we discovered we could actually stretch above ten percent.

Along life's way I've met so many who have discovered this joyful way of life.

There was Walter Sundberg, a farmer near Fergus Falls, Minnesota. Walter was a tither. As a young pastor I was teamed with him to visit congregations to encourage them to be more generous in their support of the church beyond the local congregation. I recall vividly a visit to a rural congregation. They were ready for us. As soon as we had made our presentation the chairman made it clear that their priority was to take care of local needs first. If there was anything left, they might share with others. Then he took from his pocket a newspaper clipping of an obituary. It told of a man who had left his small fortune to the local church. "This is what we think everyone should do," he said. Walter listened patiently and then responded with two simple words: "That's wonderful what that man did. But I want the joy of giving while I'm living."

Then there was Bob and Virginia Stakle. Bob was the first director of the World Hunger Appeal in the Lutheran Church in America. They exuded the joy of giving. After Bob's death Virginia came to a meeting of our retired synod bishops and spouses. She told of how she and Bob had decided many years ago to increase their giving by one percent each year. Now, she said, she continued to do so and was having the satisfaction of giving 26% of her income to others.

And I recall the man who approached me not long ago at the Northern Illinois Synod Assembly. "Do you recall, bishop, those videos you made when the ELCA was launched nearly 25 years ago? And you talked about tithing." "Yes," I replied, "I remember that." "Well," he said, "my wife and I had thought about it for years, but never stepped across the line. That day we did – and I want to thank you for these nearly 25 years when we've had the most wonderful life one could ever imagine."|

This morning I hope you'll listen to that lunatic Elijah. And you can add me to the your list of lunatics. But, most important of all, listen to that greatest lunatic of all when he says to you: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be given to you." (Luke 6:38)

My appeal to you is simple: "Try it, you will like it."

Amen.