

## Three Faithful Women

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Scriptures: I Kings 17:8–16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24–28; Mark 12:38–44

I was listening recently to the comedian Jim Gaffigan in conversation with another comedian in a refreshingly candid talk about marriage and family. Gaffigan, a married, Catholic father of five, was sharing his perspective with the younger comedian, who shared his hopes for a future marriage. In this conversation, the question of proposals came up, and this is where I was a little surprised at what came next. Gaffigan shared the story of him proposing to his wife, but further reflected that it was not in that big, statement-making moment that he found the most meaning in his relationship with his wife. It was in those smaller, day to day moments of connection. These grand gestures in big moments were important of course, but they didn't compose the essential core of the relationship.

He expanded this to his relationship with his kids as well. While of course he remembers the birth of his children, it is in the moments of sitting and talking with them, in the small moments of parent/child affection, that he finds the most meaning. We might say that the moments of pomp and milestones are the signs of our relational lives, while these smaller moments compose their substance.

We see a similar dynamic when it comes to our faith, with our relationship to the Triune God. We rightly think of this relationship in terms of major signposts. I was baptized, I was confirmed, I surrendered my life to Jesus. Good, necessary,

sacramental, important moments. But we do not live a life perpetually on the mountain top. If we are to have a faith that endures to the end, we will have a lot of mundane, regular walking with Jesus through our daily lives. It will be at times unglamorous and even difficult, but we will be able to say at the end that our relationship with the God of the universe wasn't merely composed of a few high and holy days, but was a true and living faith.

How to do this well will be our object of study for the rest of our lives, but thankfully, in our appointed readings for the morning, we have a couple of women who show us the way.

Baking a loaf of bread. Making a donation to the temple so small that it would barely be noticed on the ledger. These do not appear to be things of great significance, practically or spiritually. And yet, these two women show us that these seemingly small things can be some of the most substantive actions that we can take in our lives.

Our Old Testament reading takes us to the land of Sidon, a northern Canaanite power on the edge of the land of Israel. When God instructed the people under Joshua to conquer the land of Canaan, Sidon was one of the cities that was not taken. As such, it became a thorn in the side of God's people for generations, a source of not only a rival for territory and land, but of pagan worship in God's land. This pagan worship is part of Israel's downfall, as Sidonians are listed among the foreign wives that Solomon takes in order to make alliances, marriages that bring pagan worship into Jerusalem (1 Kings 11). This influence culminates in the

character of Jezebel, daughter of the Sidonian king, wife to crooked King Ahab, and chief rival to the prophet Elijah. At the lowest point for the relationship between God's people and the people of Sidon, Joel chapter 3 reveals that Sidon enslaved and robbed Israel, actions for which they will receive the judgment of God.

But even in such a land, the Spirit of God can and does move. To those who would listen to his voice, he will speak. Elijah is told to go, outside of Israel's territory, to the Sidonian city of Zarephath. Elijah is told to go into the land of Jezebel, who would just a few chapters later be the main force that is seeking his life. But it is a faithful woman Elijah seeks. In Sidon, God tells Elijah, God has commanded a widow to feed him. Israel was going through a drought and Elijah was camping by a brook and was relying on ravens to bring him food. So I am sure this was a welcome invitation, to eat with an actual person, even if it meant going into the evil land of Sidon.

But I imagine any hope Elijah had for a luxurious banquet quickly fades, because he does find the woman, a widow, but she is not in a situation of abundance. The drought has hit her and her son hard. She is gathering a couple of sticks to make bread with her last bit of flour and oil, and then she has no other plans than to die. Elijah trusts in God's provision, and asks her to do the same. "Make me a cake first," he says, "and then when you go to your jars make some for yourself and your son, they will not run out until the drought is over."

Baking a cake of bread is a small thing. But to this woman, it was everything. All she had. She was asked to lay it down with the promise that in her obedience, God would provide for her needs. And remarkably, this woman does exactly that. She acts in

faith. She is an anti-Jezebel. She's from the same place, but instead of persecuting the prophet of God, she provides for him, even in her poverty, and in doing so finds what she needs.

But God isn't yet done with this family. If you look past our reading for today in 1 Kings 17, you will see that Elijah rides out the next while with the widow. Indeed, according to the promise of God, the flour and the oil do not run out. But then, the widow's son dies. She thinks that she has done something wrong, and so she comes to Elijah, asking what the prophet has against her. She doesn't know yet that she is in the middle of a resurrection story. Elijah pleads with God for the boy to receive his life again. God answers. The woman sees the life-giving power of God. She gets her son back from the grave.

Imagine if she had refused to bake that cake of bread. She would have saved her last bit for her family, but then what? Perhaps the family would have found another way to eat, maybe they wouldn't have. What they would have missed for sure would have been not only the provision of God, but his resurrection power in the face of death. We wouldn't have heard her story. We wouldn't have seen this early echo of the center hope of our Resurrection faith. Thank God for this woman's faith.

Consider with me another faithful woman, also a widow, who Jesus sees giving her last dime to the Temple offering. Jesus is at the Temple with his disciples, and he frankly doesn't like what he sees. He has just been put to the test with a host of disingenuous questions from the Temple authorities about taxes and the resurrection of the dead. Jesus warns his disciples about such leaders: They are in it

for themselves and their own wealth, honor, and place in society. They won't even stop at taking up the houses of widows to build their little kingdoms. This unrighteousness is a sign for Jesus that the Temple itself will be destroyed, and he prophesies as much after a little interruption.

Enter one widow. As she gives all she has, it is possible she was the victim of the schemes of the scribes Jesus warns about. Her house could have been one of the ones the scribes have devoured. She comes along with those who have much more than she does, and she would have been easily overlooked. But not by Jesus.

This widow is the anti-scribe. She is not the perpetuator of the unjust system, but the victim. And yet, she gives. Jesus will teach elsewhere that when one demands your cloak from you, you should give them your tunic also, revealing to them and to anyone who is watching the shamefulness of the injustice that to which you are being subjected. This woman is acting in a similarly revelatory way, even if her intent is to be faithful to contribute to God's work in the Temple. Her simple, yet costly gift, puts to shame the system that exploits people like her. Look what it has done, and yet she gives. Thank God for this faithful woman.

We just passed an important benchmark in what has been a grueling and contentious political season in our country. Some of us are excited this morning about the prospect of things to come. Some of us are fearful of what might be next. Some of us don't know what to think or don't think we should care enough to have an opinion. Whatever you are feeling this morning, may I suggest we take our cues from these two women, willing to put everything on the line, committing to faithful

obedience to God, regardless of circumstance. We will surely be surprised at the things he can do with very little.

If you will allow me, I would like to offer up one more portrait of a faithful woman this morning. Some of you may know that my Grandma, Alice Hatfield, passed away shortly before her 92nd birthday this April. Grandma was a faithful believer for her whole life, serving in all of the congregations where my Grandpa was the pastor, and doing her own ministry with mentoring teenagers and young women looking for wisdom, a commodity she had in spades. Above all, she was an anchor for our family, raising her six kids to maturity in Christ. She was a great lady. In addition to all of this, I think she may have given me the greatest argument for the reliability of my Christian faith I have ever received - her tears.

Having been interested in the reasons for faith, I am familiar with a variety of arguments from creation and philosophy for the existence of God. I devoured *Mere Christianity* like every other youth group kid who heard it was the key to taking the next step into intellectual faith. Many of these arguments have blessed and strengthened me, and yet they pale in comparison to my Grandma's tears.

It was about 10 years ago, and my grandma had been walking with Jesus for a good 70 years at that point. She was going through something difficult, a batch of suffering for someone she loved that she did not understand. As she spoke, the tears came. "I just don't know why God would let this happen."

My Grandma was not someone who was duped by a story about a far off or non-existent deity who didn't care about what happened to us. She was a woman who walked daily with the Lord and thought him worthy of bringing him her everything, even her questions, doubts, and tears. Even as she did not understand, I heard an unwavering faith in her voice. I saw an unwavering faith in her long life of faithfulness. She would give the Lord whatever she had. In that moment, what she had was tears. Those tears remain a gift to me in considering the beauty of faith, with its questions, joys, encouragements, and tears. My Grandma's tears have more than once buoyed my faith in moments of doubt or weakness. Thank God for my faithful Grandma.

There's a common thread between the three women we've heard stories from today. They are totally dependent on God. The Sidonian widow for her flour, oil, and the life of her son, the widow in the Temple in her poverty, my Grandma for the answers to her questions and comfort in her pain. They were all seeking what they needed from the right place. God is the God of the needy and broken. We need look no further than our Psalm to be reminded of this.

Those who are in need may be tempted to look toward earthly powers to save them. There is certainly no shortage of earthly powers who guarantee to give us what we need. But they are not worthy of our ultimate trust. Don't put your trust in them, the Psalmist says, for mortal power is just that - mortal - temporary, limited by its appointed breaths. In contrast, the Psalm calls those who trust in the Lord blessed, because the Lord is anything but mortal. He is the one

who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them,  
who keeps faith forever;  
who executes justice for the oppressed,  
who gives food to the hungry.”

Then follows a litany of needy people: prisoners, the blind, those bowed down with heavy burdens, the righteous, those far from their native lands, widows, and orphans. God carries with him an army of the weak and vulnerable, those who have nowhere else to turn in their needs but him, those who are ready to give everything they have, meager as it is.

So if you are feeling meager this morning, there is good news. You are exactly the type of person God wants. He is inviting you to join him. It doesn't matter if what you think you have to offer is small, it is a precious gift in his eyes. And to those who surrender all they have, they are not only seen, but loved, held, and cared for. Let us trust in him!