

“The Essentials” / I Kings 17:10-16 / 9 June 2013

And in the midst of a famine, “They ate for many days,” the Book of First Kings tells us. “The jar of meal was not emptied, and the jug of oil did not fail.” They just kept scraping the bottom until the drought ended and the famine passed, and each day they found that they had just enough. Funny how little we really need, when it comes right down to it. Strange how little it really takes to sustain life...and perhaps even happiness. How much do you need in order to be happy? What silver bullet will finally do the trick?

Many of you know that yesterday, I walked a little over three miles with two and a half gallons of water on my back. I called it my “5-K Water Haul.” Why did I do it? Well, I wanted to understand the world a little better. And...I wanted to see if I was as tough as an eight-year old Haitian. You see, you and I consume about 80 gallons of water per day. Of course, we don't drink it all. That would be silly. We wash our clothes with it. We wash our cars with it. We flush three to five gallons of it down the toilet several times a day. We cook with it, and we send many gallons of perfectly good potable water streaming down the drain while we luxuriate in hot daily showers. Some of us even shower twice a day, washing bodies that aren't even dirty.

And so, when it came time to take part in our 5-K walk or run to support Bower Hill Church's clean water project in Haiti, I got to thinking about how hard most people in the world have to work for their water. And as I thought about Haiti, and water, and walking five whole kilometers (a little over three miles) I couldn't help but dwell on the fact that—though you and I might consume 80 gallons per day—the average person in the Third World lives on just two and a half gallons of water per day. According to the World Health Organization, too, most people in Africa and Asia walk about five kilometers, round trip, to fetch their water. And the task of carrying water is usually assigned to women and children. And so, I decided that it was a perfect opportunity for me to experience something that many millions of people all across the globe endure everyday: a 5-K water haul. It was a chance to express solidarity with the very people of Haiti whose lives our water projects are meant to improve. Besides, I thought, two and half gallons of water is only 17 ½ pounds. That's nothing...or at least it seems like nothing when you're sitting comfortably at your desk, planning a grand act of solidarity with the poor of the world. It's a little more than nothing the next day.

I did get some funny looks, marching through South Park with three plastic water jugs dangling by the handles from an old broomstick, which I carried across my shoulders like an ox-yoke. And though the water burden gave me a good excuse to not have to actually run the 5-K, it occurred to me later that it really wasn't much of a gesture. Most people fetching water in the Third World end up carrying a lot more than two and half gallons. They have to get water for their whole household, and so many of them will make several trips a day with a five-gallon bucket balanced perfectly atop their heads. If I could have pulled that off, I admit that it would have been a far grander gesture, but I didn't think I was up for it. Besides, if I were to be honest, I would have had to carry not two-and-a-half gallons of water, nor even five gallons, but the whole eighty gallons that I actually use. And I was quite certain that I wasn't up for that. In fact, if I had even tried, I'm pretty sure you'd have a substitute minister in the pulpit today.

Surely the finest, most honest gesture of all would have been to actually try to live on just two and half gallons of water for one single day. What might life have looked like then? What if, after trekking three miles through the park, I came home to bathe myself in less than half of the water I had just carried, then did all my other water-related tasks—including drinking—with the rest of it? You really could do all your cooking, and washing, and tooth-brushing, and shaving, and all your drinking and eating on just two and a half gallons. The truth is...we could do it. But we don't because we don't have to.

In the end, really, how much is enough for us? How much water is enough? How many millions of barrels of fossil fuels are enough to keep this city running for a single day; how many barges of coal does it take to keep the lights on? How many digits do you need in your annual income?

How many gadgets are enough? When you can check your emails, and your text messages, and your FaceBook all from your telephone, how much electronic connectedness is enough? And truly...how many words of praise will be enough to finally convince you of your worth? How many gestures of respect would be enough to satisfy your ego once and for all? How much affection will restore your trust? How many gentle reassurances would be enough to convince you that your child's troubles aren't all your fault? How many achievements would be enough to make you feel truly safe and content? How much is enough? The desires of our hearts are many, far too many to satisfy. But here's the tricky thing about desires: If we spend our lives trying to satisfy them, then nothing will ever be enough. Happiness will forever run from those who pursue it. But if, instead, we invest our lives in simply meeting our own needs, and the needs of others, then happiness just might sidle up to us unexpectedly and make its home with us. What might this world be if you and I only asked for daily bread, for ourselves and for others? If we live for things that don't matter, then nothing will ever be enough. But if we actually stop to recognize that we already have more than enough, then we might feel free to expend our energies in making sure that others also have enough, and then we just might end up...happy. For happiness is better not as a pursuit in itself, but as a byproduct in some other, more generous pursuit.

One thing I like about preaching in the summer is that the lectionary assigns us a lot of these wonderful old stories from the books of Kings and Samuel. They're lively, amusing stories with very human characters. This whole segment of the Book of First Kings might be called "The Misadventures of the Prophet Elijah." Now it's true that Elijah could be a bit of a baby when he didn't get his way, and he was known to throw some enormous temper tantrums. He had a penchant for calling down fire from the heavens; though he was far less cantankerous than his successor, Elisha, who once had a band of children eaten by bears for making fun of his bald head. In today's reading, Elijah has made the king and queen angry, and so he's been hiding out in the wilderness. Years of drought have brought famine to the land, and old Elijah is forced to find his way into a village to beg for food. Now, mendicant monks and prophets were not unusual in Elijah's times. In fact, the gospels imply that Jesus, too, lived off the generosity of others, especially women. And so, it's no surprise when Elijah shows up at the village gate and asks a woman for something to eat and drink. The rest of the story is quite well known. The woman at first objects that she has too little to share. All she has is enough for her son and herself to eat one last meal. But because she shares what little she has with the prophet, she discovers that each day when she returns to her flour jar, there's just enough in it for the three of them to eat for that day. And so they ride out the famine, subsisting on little cakes of cornbread or perhaps barley bread. Now, I know what you're thinking: Couldn't a miracle-worker like Elijah do better than daily bread? Why not a Reuben sandwich with a side of fries? Well, there's wisdom in recognizing "enough."

And here in our land of crowded pantries, where cupboard shelves sag beneath the weight of their load, where our freezers are packed with food, much better stuff than Elijah and the widow's daily supply of oily meal cakes: how much is enough for us, for you and for me? Well, it depends on what you're asking for out of life. If you're asking for daily bread—as Jesus taught us to ask—if you can be contented with that, then most of us will find that we've really got enough and to share. But if you're asking for the myriad desires of the heart, then nothing will ever be enough. The widow of Zarephath has watched her dreams come and go. She, too, had her joyous wedding day, long ago. Now her husband is dead, leaving her to care for their son on her own. She, too, had wished for all the things that a woman desires in a life of years. But now there's a drought in the land, nothing to eat, and she expects to watch her child die. But somehow in the midst of her nightmares, she manages to be generous because there is a joy that can sustain us even after dreams have fled. There is a hope that can carry us even through life's darkest moments. The irony of it all is that our world tells us that we'll only be happy if we cling to what is ours and try to gain more. But the wisdom of the widow tells us that real joy comes when you share the little you have with the one who has less.

Queen Victoria is often portrayed as a dour, unsmiling woman. But she actually had an active sense of humor. One time, she was sitting next to an elderly admiral who was very hard of hearing. The Queen asked about the progress of repairs to a wrecked ship, but the admiral did not catch her words. Out of the politeness, the Queen tried a different conversation, "How is your sister?" But the old admiral had finally made sense of the queen's original question about the ship. He said, "Ah, she'll be fine, when we turn her over and scrape the barnacles off her bottom." The Queen was so overcome with laughter that she had to hide her face in her handkerchief.

I think many of us feel as if we're scraping bottom much of the time. Not scraping barnacles off the bottom of a ship, but scraping the bottom of that old flour jar, not knowing quite where we're going to come up with enough strength for another day at a job we hate, or in a relationship that drains us, or in a state of anxiety that steals all the joy out of life. We've got far more food, and water, and shelter than any of us needs, but we're scraping the bottom of our emotional flour jars, hoping to come up with a day's supply of happiness, or confidence, or some sense of safety. Truly, there are places in yourself that will never, never be satisfied. There are canyons in your soul that will never be filled no matter how many shovelfuls you cast into them. So, stop trying. Turn to the tasks that are within your reach. Turn to acts of simplicity and kindness. Turn to acts that ensure daily bread for yourself and others. Turn from your desires to the pressing needs of others, and you will find that those canyons will seem far less urgent. How much do you need, really? How much water, how much approval, how much praise?

This is the paradox of contentment. Jesus put it this way, "Whoever wants to save their own life will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it." When he says "lose their life," he doesn't mean to die; he means to lose track of one's life by casting it into something bigger than itself. What would it mean for you to lose your life in something that would outlive you, some quest, some dream of daily bread for the world? Chasing after your own happiness is not the way to be happy. Seeking the well-being of the stranger and being satisfied with your daily bread: that is the way of abundant life. The little bit that you can give back to the world around you might not seem like much, but it could just be enough to fill someone's flour jar for one more day. Amen.