

Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
July 16, 2017
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1 Kings 17:8-24, Luke 7:11-17

Spiritually Alive

There were two widows. Jesus and Elijah had asked for something from each widow. In our scripture passage this morning we see Jesus' prophetic ministry echoing the prophet Elijah in the passage from 1 Kings below—a prophetic ministry that testifies to “Immanuel” – *God with us*. God was with Jesus, Elijah, and the two widows.

Jesus prophetic ministry was to spread the Good News of God's reign to the poor and powerless—the widows in both Luke and 1 Kings represent the most powerless in that day and time.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves as people of God who follow Jesus: What is our “prophetic ministry?” How can we show Danvers that we are living in the midst of *Immanuel*, in the presence of God? How can we echo and witness to Jesus' love, compassion, and care for the poor and powerless?

We all sometimes feel poor and powerless and as a body of Christ we should answer that call to care for one another. There are also the structural and societal poor and powerless—the stranger/immigrant, the poor, the discriminated against, the economically oppressed (homeless, jobless, the sick, the lonely).

Jesus spread the good word, not JUST through words, but through action and mission work to and on behalf of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the oppressed. We, too, can make a difference. Yes, the world is a big place with lots of problems, but we can all take that first step. Consider the story of a man in Mexico...

A man was walking down a deserted Mexican beach at sunset. As he walked along, he began to see another man in the distance. As he grew nearer, he noticed that the local native kept leaning down, picking something up and throwing it out into the water. Time and again he kept hurling things out into the ocean.

The man approached even closer, he noticed that the man was picking up starfish that had washed up on the beach, and, one at a time, he was throwing them back into the water.

The man was puzzled. He approached the other man and said. "Good evening, friend. I was wondering what you are doing."

"I'm throwing these starfish back into the ocean. You see, it's low tide right now and all of these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. If I don't throw them back into the sea, they'll die up here from lack of oxygen."

"I understand," the man replied, "but there must be thousands of starfish on this beach. You can't possibly get to all of them. There are simply too many. And don't you realize this is probably happening on hundreds of beaches all up and down this coast. Can't you see that you can't possibly make a difference?"

The local native smiled, bent down and picked up yet another starfish, and as he threw it back into the sea, he replied, "Made a difference to that one!"

(From Making a difference <http://www.serve.com/cmtan/buddhism/Stories/awake.html>)

What's so important is not necessarily the miracles, but the motivations undergirding Jesus' (and our) actions: our little expressions of action of compassion, love, and healing.

The Christian story is a story of God's power over death. Are we not talking here about more than merely power over physical death, but the power of God's working in our lives can give us power over the things in our lives that are separating us from our love of God and neighbor and self (spiritual death vs physical death).

Where is our world "spiritually dead?" Is it when the world looks at the poor and says to itself—"well, I've got mine, they just have to get theirs." "They" just must not be working hard enough, some people think. Or, perhaps, it is when our neighbors look at poor, starving, oppressed people sneaking across the border and can only see "an illegal alien" rather than seeing a neighbor in need? Is it when people demonize others because their faith is different than theirs and they practice rituals that seem weird or silly or embarrassing? Is it when we pass a homeless person on the street and we avert our eyes and can't even muster a word of greeting? Is it when people use schemes and threats and emotional blackmail and the power of money or position to get what they want out of life?

Conversely, when are we spiritually alive and witnessing to the reign of God in our midst? When we sit with someone who is sick and in pain to give them comfort? When we share even when we think we don't have enough? Is it when we acknowledge the complexity of the world and people who are different and refuse to live life by the "we versus they" attitude? Is it when we do something to use less energy, clean up our messes behind us, walk lightly on the earth leaving as little a footprint as possible?

It is said that when Buddha was first Enlightened he was asked,

"Are you a God?"

"No," he replied.

"Are you a saint?"

"No."

"Then what are you?"

And he answered, "I am awake."

(from <http://www.serve.com/cmtan/buddhism/Stories/awake.html>)

The most important thing in being alive spiritually is simply walking through this world with our eyes, ears, and hearts open to call of God to help our neighbor, and sometimes, even helping ourselves by seeking out a community that will love and care for us. A relationship with God keeps our spirits alive and alert for those times we can truly love and help our neighbors. Being awake means trying to understand the complexity of the world rather than defining the world in simple platitudes, especially those that reflect biases and prejudices.

We don't know for sure how long the widow's son had been dead in the story from the Gospel, but we might surmise that the death did not just happen yesterday. When we hear stories about death in the Bible, remember sometimes to think metaphorically and interpret the death as not just a physical death, but consider that the story might also be about spiritual death. Consider that the story might also be about spiritual death of someone who had let their relationship with God grow stale, lifeless. No matter how long people have been dead to "real life," God has the power to enter into our lives if we continue to invite God into our life, our homes, and wherever we are in whatever situation we are in. Through practicing awareness of God in every moment, we can be awake and alert to opportunities for resurrection! Resurrection for the lost, the downtrodden, the sad, the lonely, and the rejected. Amen.

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