

***The Cycle of Grace* (Luke 9:51-62)**  
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**The Third Sunday after Pentecost (I Kings 17; Psalm 77:1-2; Galatians 5:1, 13-25)**  
**June 26, 2022**  
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From the beginning, poets and prophets and philosophers have long described our unified self in complementary terms of mind, body, and soul. The Apostle Paul metaphorically described us this way: *"This priceless treasure, we hold in a common earthenware jar"* (II Corinthians 4:7, J.B. Phillips). The self, our minds and our souls, are housed in our physical bodies. Are they separate entities or are they some mystical unity of self?

I see the tension between body and soul every Sunday. (You know I can see you, don't you?) The struggle between the soul and the body is not just waged in our sleepy eyes in church on a Sunday morning.

Singer/Songwriter Lyle Lovett sang about the soul-body conflict in a song called, "Church," when a struggle was waged between the preacher and his need to preach long and hard over against the hunger of the choir members who waged their own insurrection as the noon hour drew nigh. He sang ...

*I went to church last Sunday so I could sing and pray. But something quite unusual happened on that day. Now church it started right on time just like it does without a doubt and everything was all just fine except when it came time to let us out. You know the preacher he kept preaching. He told us, 'I have one more thing to say, children, before you think of leaving ... You better think about the judgment day.'*

*Now everyone got nervous because everyone was hungry too. And everyone was wondering what was the next thing he would do And the preacher, he kept preaching. He said now 'I'll remind you if I may, you all better pay attention or I might decide to preach all day.'*

*And now everyone was getting so hungry that the old ones started feeling ill, and the weak ones started passing out, and the young ones they could not sit still, and the preacher's voice rose higher so I snuck up on the balcony, and I crept into the choir, and I begged them, 'Brothers, sisters, help me please.' I said 'When I give you a signal,' I said, 'When I raise up my hand won't you please join with me together and praise the Lord?*

*And the preacher he kept preaching. Long is the struggle, hard the fight, and I prayed, 'Father please forgive me and then I stood up and with all my might I sang to the Lord, 'Let praises be. It's time for dinner, now let's go eat. We've got some beans and some good cornbread and I listened to what the preacher said, 'Now it's to the Lord let praises be. It's time for dinner, now let's go eat.' (That's the refrain)*

*And as we watched in disbelief, these were the words he spoke. He said, 'Now mama's in the kitchen and she's been there all day and I know she's cooking something good. So let's bow our heads and pray.' And the moral of this story, children, it is plain but true. God knows if a preacher preaches long enough, even he'll get hungry too. (Don't you love Country music?)*

There are stories in the Bible of tough circumstances that are both ordinary and extraordinary. The stories are linked by the demands of our bodies for nourishment, health, and purpose. A prophet of God walks on the earth just like the rest of us and the demands of life are the same for them as for anyone.

In I Kings 17, Elijah was hungry and his need for food forced him to go up to Sidon where a widow woman was living with her son. The providence of God had paved the way: "The Lord had commanded the woman" to feed him and so he went there and announced to her that she should feed him. What Elijah did not seem to notice was the woman and her son were starving. Nevertheless, she took what she had and made the prophet a meal that depleted their food supplies. When Elijah learned of her plight, he comforted her with the words we remember best from Jesus in just such moments of anxiety: "Have no fear."

Friends, there is a gentle rhythm to God's grace. Sometimes we are the recipients of that grace while other times God puts us in position to offer grace like a gift of a cool cup of water on a hot day.

There's an old saying, "Grace given, grace received," that points us to the rhythms of life and how God partners with us. Even in crisis moments, this cycle of grace is a possibility. Think of grace as an intangible expression of God's great and free goodness, spilling over in every moment and in every circumstance if one will open up their eyes to behold and experience it.

In the feeding of the five thousand, a situation unusually like this one occurs and Jesus gives a response to the practicality of the overrunning of demand by supply. And so, we're tempted to ask, "What good will my gift do in light of the world's great need?" Jesus must have known this Elijah story because his answer is the same ... one cup of cold water, one widow's mite, five loaves of bread. The answer Jesus gives is, "Let's see."<sup>1</sup>

Don't be so worried. "Well, that's easy for you to say ..." But "*Have no fear*" is not only a great line from the Bible, it's a line that keeps surfacing in the Bible in the most stressful instances. Over and over again, this line gets repeated. "Don't be afraid." Jesus illustrated it this way in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Do not worry ... about what you shall eat or what you shall drink, or about your body, what you shall wear.*" (Then he gives the illustration) "*Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them*" (Matthew 6:25-26, NRSV).

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<sup>1</sup> Garret Keizer, *The Christian Century*, July 14-21, 1999, 707

The God of the Bible holds a fondness for the poor, the downtrodden, the hungry, the widows and the orphans. (At least Jesus seemed to think so.)

I believe God is ever present in all our struggles in life. God is present in the blessing and the curse that's ours to experience, for all the good things and for all the many ways we slug it out from day to day. God is present when we're unemployed and can't find the path to our next job and the way in which we do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. God is present when our dearest relationships have died and turns into divorce. God is present when we're at our wits end in knowing which way to turn that will lead us out of the weeds and toward a hopeful future.

This starving woman simply gave what she had. Perhaps she was like the widow who gave her last two cents in her offering at the Temple. Jesus noticed what she did and called her out to the boys as an example of extravagant generosity.

Even today, the scholars who study the giving habits of people paint this same picture: viz., that it's the poor who are more likely to be generous, not the rich, not the privileged, not the powerful. The rich tend to tip poorly, giving something that costs them nothing, while the poor tend to dig deep and give sacrificially out of their substance. Generosity is an example of "Grace given, grace received" and it's a lesson we can take away from this story.

Hunger gave way to grief and the power of this story was extended to the gift of life itself as the widow learned her boy had died. Here the cycle of grace comes full circle. She had given grace away through her generosity and now grace was offered to her in return.

We can come to terms with the fact that whether it's poverty or hunger or illness or death itself, the great God stands with us and wants to accept the gift of life as a precious gift of grace. We're to take our gift of life and share it as we live and breathe and have our being. "Grace given, grace received" all the way across the arc of life.

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