

## Unfailing Gifts

### SLIDE – DRY LAND

We live in a world which says that there is not enough, and yet in my own personal context there is too much to choose from when I go down the aisle in any store. We live in a world where another strong message says that we must get our own stuff first and hold on to it and protect it, and yet Jesus demonstrated an ethic where when all was shared there was an abundance of what was needed. We live in a world which tempts us to believe that we own goods because of our own abilities apart from anything else, and yet my overall understanding of the biblical story is that God has created me and all that exists.

### SLIDE –FULL WHEAT FIELD

All that I am, my body, my mind, and my heart, has come to me as a gift from God.

The Old Testament text for today is part of a larger story. Getting the back story will be helpful as we consider themes of scarcity and abundance, and themes of confluence, provision and generosity. For hundreds of years the people of God known as Israel struggled to be faithful people. God would work through unexpected characters in unanticipated ways to move the people to faith.

Long ago God listened to the pleas of God's people as they asked that human kings rule over them. The people of God had thought such leadership would be good because they had observed it as a style of leadership of other nations. The problem of remaining faithful though still persisted as the people could only be expected to be as faithful as their leader king.

### SLIDE –LEADER IS ONE...

King David was said to be the best of them all. Yet he was not without faults. One of his greatest attributes was that he saw his sin, he grieved over his sin, and then he went and worshiped God.

The experiment of the people of God being ruled by a single king lasted just over 100 years. The people of God then split and formed two smaller kingdoms, each having its own king. In our Old Testament story for today yet another new king of Israel, Ahab, has been crowned. Just so you are aware, he was considered to be one of the worst of them all. Ahab's use of power led him to marry Jezebel, a princess of Sidon.

Ahab built temples for little gods like Baal, whom his wife worshiped. He erected sacred poles for people to dance around and make their requests to goddesses of fertility. By his actions Ahab ignored God. Ahab did not worship God. Ahab did not confess that God had created him and all that exists. Instead, Ahab was attracted to all the little rituals that people go through thinking they can make their own lives and so they can dabble in whatever is the latest. He could not see that there was no life in these daily activities. These things that Ahab did made God angry.

God sent Elijah to counter Ahab's acts of unfaithfulness. God will be seen as the God who has power over nature and life itself. The larger story is that God sends Elijah to Ahab to announce a drought which will persist for years in an effort to teach Ahab who to trust. Later Elijah will announce the rain which will end the period of famine and want. During the drought, Elijah is to remain near, and God will provide for him. Elijah, called to trust and follow God's word, will be tested, and he will come to know that he could easily die without the provision of God.

### SLIDE – FLASK OF OIL AND MEAL

During the famine, Elijah is sent to a starving widow and her son. She is from Sidon. She is of the same people as Jezebel, the new wife of Ahab, who prays to all sorts of gods and goddesses to no avail. The widow sees that this is the end. She sees there is nothing to hope in and no possibility to get through this crisis. She is overrun with a desperate sense of finality. Dying here might be better than living.

Then Elijah enters her life. He comes to her asking for a drink of water. She does as he asks. Then a second request, if she could give him a piece of bread. The widow, totally impoverished does not see that she has anything to share. I cannot imagine what she thought as she was preparing the last meal for herself and her starving son. Does not Elijah's God see that the only option is death?

Into this impossibility, Elijah speaks a word of God, "Do not be afraid." In the middle of this last food, God speaks a word that catches the widow that creates space in the widow's heart where the Spirit of God can enter. God's word creates trust and faith. "Do not be afraid, make the bread, have your meal, share your bread, for your supply of meal and oil will not fail." The widow did as Elijah commanded and the meal and oil did not fail, they fed the widow, her son and Elijah for many days. She and her son are delivered from starvation. Elijah is delivered from the effects of the famine. They were dying apart from the provision of God. But now God supplies all that they need.

What is our desperate hunger today? What do we need God to provide for us? What are we dying from?

#### SLIDE – CIVILITY

Some say our greatest need today is to be able to talk with one another on diverse topics and then commune together in the peace of Christ. Society has struggled with this for a while. In the last 50 years leaders have produced teachings to help families and communities as they navigate differences. Differences persist. Left to ourselves, human beings tend to narrow their vision. We can become like the widow of Zarephath, unable to imagine the possibility of divine provision, and instead of life, remain in a state of starvation.

The more we fear revealing our thoughts and views with one another because of repercussions, the more we become separated from one another, and the more we are moving towards death. The more we live in fear of one another, the more we deny the gifts of God, the more we will need to be delivered.

Jesus leads us to go the other direction. Love God and love one another. Pray for your enemies. Care for one another like the Samaritan. Forgive one another like the father who receives his lost son. Give regard and respect to the most vulnerable among you. Can we do this? We can only by the grace of God. We can do this only because it is God who provides what we need, a word that creates trust in our hearts, that we may be fed, and so live.

#### SLIDE -- GENEROSITY

It is Jesus who emptied himself and became poor for our sakes. It is Jesus who suffered away our lack, who died and was raised by the Father, giving us what we need. Jesus, in the meal, shares his grace with us, in a meal that never fails, feeding us for many days. That is our unending gift that God with us in Jesus. Christ loving us and forgiving us and feeding us day to day and week to week. When the spirit is at work in us the gifts of God flow out of us.

I have observed the energy created by God's Spirit in you as you have taken hold of the mission statement at St. John's. I have seen how you have embraced this and then used it in your ministry to one

another and for the sake of the world. What happens as you incorporate this mission is a demonstration of the great generosity of God, being given to you and flowing out from you to others. Some of the leaders here have seen this and named it as a Confluence of Generosity. A collection of these stories of the Confluences of Generosity are out on the bulletin board. Here is one:

*One activity I especially enjoyed was when I drove some summer stretch kids to deliver flowers and treats to shut ins. Chris had gotten a list from Judy (senior and shut in ministry) of names, and we drove around town delivering to our list. I had 2 youth leaders and 2 middle schoolers in my car, and what amazed me was how comfortable the middle schoolers were delivering. They literally jumped out of the car first, without knowing the person we were delivering to, and confidently walked up to the door and said who they were and where they were from, and even had a small conversation with each!! I know the youth leaders were prepared to be role models and show them how to do it, but already the middle schoolers were experienced in service and embraced the activity with generous hearts!!*

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There are stories of the Confluences of Generosity which have yet to be noticed. There are stories of the Confluences of Generosity which have yet to be written. But this we can trust, that our God, the maker of heaven and earth, gives us a continuous supply of gifts that never fail.