

1 Kings 17: 8-24 Placing Trust

Placing trust. That is a problem that seems to be a major issue today—as individuals and as a community of faith. There is a great deal of talk about who or what can be trusted. Many people who make claims about themselves in which they demand we place trust—often in contradiction to what their actions have demonstrated. A lot of warnings are given about those “out there” who are just waiting to prey upon us—who want to steal our identity; who want to lead us into doing things which will harm our finances, our health, and/or our family...the list seems endless. Sometimes those who want to do harm are named, but in such general terms it leads to a fearful distrust of entire groups. On the other hand, there are those offering team building programs as a way to improve trust—to make teams out of individuals and thus increasing productivity among co-workers, for example. One of the exercises which I have seen used made a impression about how difficult it is to truly let go and to trust. There are two forms of this basic exercise. One involved 6 individuals forming a circle around one who then leans backward until their balance is lost. The six are to be depended upon to catch and hold up that person preventing an actual fall. Another form of this exercise illustrates the point clearly. When the exercise is done in pairs, the individuals stand about 3 feet apart facing the same direction. The one in front is blindfolded and asked to lean back until they fall into the arms of their partner. In the first version of this exercise, I quickly chose to be one of the surrounding members holding the “trusting “ individual up. This was done with a youth group whose members had no fear. They were able to let go and risk falling. When it came to the second exercise, each member of the pair had to take a turn being blindfolded. Even though I was blindfolded, I still tried to turn my head and see...I was not very good at placing my trust in my partner.

The issue of trust is a part of our scripture readings this morning. In the Hebrew text we begin with Elijah who has been entrusted with God’s message for Ahab and the people of Israel. Elijah knows his message of judgment is not likely to be welcomed by Ahab—and that there will likely be consequences to him because of it—but Elijah delivers the message there will be no more rain until the Lord decides to send it because of what Ahab has done and led the people into doing. After delivering the message, the Lord tells Elijah to go and hide in the wilderness east of the Jordan away from Ahab. He is to go to a Wadi which will supply him with water from the mountains, but there is no town or village in which to find sanctuary. The Lord has told Elijah that he will be able to drink from the Wadi and will be fed by ravens. The usual artistic image is that of birds bringing food to Elijah. An interesting language side note is that the Hebrew word translated in our text as “raven” has a Semitic root meaning Arab, so it may have been a nomad tribe which resided in the desert to which the Lord sent Elijah. He was brought bread and meat in the morning and evening. However this happened, the Lord told Elijah to go to a particular place...and he did, trusting that the Lord would provide for his welfare. But as time passes and the drought continues, the water in the Wadi dries up and the source of his food disappears, whether the bread and meat were brought by birds or Arabs, the drought has caused them to also leave the area. At this point in the narrative, Elijah is given further instructions by the Lord: “Go now to Zar’e phath.” This direction doesn’t seem that different from the earlier instruction to go into the wilderness, east of the Jordan. We look at it

as Elijah just being told to move to a different location where food and water will still be available. But to Elijah it would have been a vastly different instruction. The wilderness east of the Jordan had been near his home, close to the region where he grew up; a region which would have been familiar to him. The wilderness might seem to us a hostile place to send someone, but Elijah knew it and would have known how to live within it. Zah're fath, on the other hand was a far away port city; it was a town south of Si'duhn and north of Tyre (tir)—it was a city belonging to the Phoenicians. It was in the homeland of Jezebel, who brought the worship of Baal with her into Israel when she married Ahab. The Lord was now asking Elijah to trust himself totally to the Lord's care; telling him to leave his homeland and venture into a foreign land to live—a foreign land where his welfare would depend upon a widow—someone whose own status made her very vulnerable, living on the edge of survival, not a person of power or status who could protect him. Elijah was to seek safety in the land of those who did not know or worship the Lord but instead worshiped the god of the Canaanite people—Baal. Elijah was asked to trust the Lord could and would protect him even there. Again Elijah trusted and went where he was directed. When he arrived in Zah're fath and found the widow, things did not seem too promising. The widow was down to her last resources and preparing for the death of herself and her son by starvation. Upon meeting her, Elijah asks her for a little water for his thirst and a small morsel of bread. Her response states her plight: "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil. I am now gathering sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." Elijah has trusted the Lord to provide for him. He has come to the place he was told to come only to find that the widow can't even provide food for herself and her son. These circumstances are such that you would think it reasonable that Elijah should perhaps show some doubt about his fate; some worry about this dire situation of being in a foreign land where the Lord is not worshiped; of being sent to the household of someone unable even to provide for herself. Yet instead of questioning God's instructions, Elijah tells this widow not to be afraid: "Go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son, For thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day the LORD sends rain on the earth.'" The widow recognized Elijah as being a foreigner, one who worships the God of Israel. Evidently the widow decides to trust Elijah and his God for she responds by doing as he requests. We are told that "Elijah and the widow's household ate for many days' from that jar of meal and jug of oil. If the timeline of 1 Kings 18 is examined, the meal and oil seem to have lasted for a couple of years. God has provided for Elijah in a totally unexpected manner using someone who does not even recognize Israel's God to protect Elijah from those who should be the covenant people worshipping Yahweh in the land given to them by Yahweh. This portion of the narrative points out the trustworthiness of the Lord. It is not always obvious where or how God's purpose will be made manifest. As the narrative continues some time has passed and the widow's son becomes ill and dies. The text doesn't give any other detail about the illness, but the widow blames Elijah saying, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!!" Just as we don't know anymore about the illness, we don't know anything about the sin the widow is talking about. Elijah response is to take the boy's body and go up into the upper chamber. There he questions God. Unlike the widow who assigned blame, Elijah asks if God

had done this. The text does not give an answer, but Elijah then prays to the Lord that the boy's life will be restored. Elijah's request is answered. The boy is returned to his mother, at which time we get an affirmation from the widow: "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." Here there is no designation of the Lord as Elijah's God or the God of Israel, just that the Yahweh is God and Elijah speak what God has determined. We often view this from the point of view as a demonstration of God's power, much like the fire called down at Mount Carmel: a demonstration which causes the widow to also declare that Yahweh is God. There are aspects to these narratives about God's power as answers to prayer that can be troubling for us today. Elijah's prayers are answered—immediately it seems. And that is often the way we approach placing our concerns before God. Like Elijah in this instance, we have the solution already designed in our heads—our expectations of what the Lord should do outlined. The question is, when this is our approach to God, are we indeed placing our trust in the promises we have received? These promises are not that everything will be worked out according to our will. No, the promises are for love and care, of being present with us. The kind of answers we usually devise for the concerns we bring to the Lord would have written an entirely different story for Elijah's life. He probably would never have even met the widow. Surely his desire would have been to stay by that familiar Wadi located near his home. When told to go there, he trusted the Lord would send provision for his needs. When told to leave there and go to reside in a foreign, hostile land where provision for his needs would be through the actions of a non-believer with no status—he went and remained there until the Lord told him to return to confront Ahab with another message. At each stage Elijah placed his trust in God. When Paul wrote to the Galatians in the epistle passage we read today, he brings up the issue of trust. The Galatians have shifted their trust away from the gospel message which he gave them. Paul is very concerned about this because he brought them a message which he had received directly from Christ when he was on the road to Damascus with the mission of persecuting early believers. Paul tells them they are to trust the message he gave them because it did not originate with him, but with Christ in that very dramatic encounter. God has revealed to us through Scripture what is expected of us. We may not have the dramatic experiences of either Elijah or Paul in our lives, but we have been gathered as the body of Christ. God has placed a call and claim upon each of us. Each one is unique to the person that we are and to the purpose God has for us. The call may be as simple as being a good neighbor, a good teacher, a good example to others of Christ's love. The ways we are called to serve are as varied as we are. The one thing about the call of God for us that I have learned to trust is that it does not depend upon what we bring to it, but upon what we trust God to supply to us as we follow in the ways taught to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. May we open our minds and our hearts and embed in them the motto which appears on the money we use daily—"In God We Trust." Amen.