

**FIRST KINGS 17:8–16.** (EHV)

Then the word of the LORD came to [Elijah]: “Get up! Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there. I have commanded a woman there, a widow, to provide for you.” So he got up and went to Zarephath. He came to the city gate, and there he saw a widow gathering sticks. He called to her and said, “Please give me a little water in a jar, so that I can have something to drink.” When she went to get it, he called to her, “Please bring me a piece of bread.” She said, “As surely as the LORD your God lives, I have no food except a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a pitcher. See, I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go and prepare it for myself and my son, so that we can eat it and then die.” Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid. Go and do just as you said. But first make a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and bring it out to me. Then go and make another for you and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says. The jar of flour will not run out and the pitcher of oil will not become empty until the day the Lord sends rain to water the surface of the ground.” So she went and did exactly as Elijah said. He and she, as well as her household, were able to eat for many days. The jar of flour did not run out, and the pitcher of oil did not become empty, just as the LORD had said through Elijah.

“First things first.” That phrase is usually used when someone is about to begin a task, but something else important needs to happen first. Sometimes it’s used more seriously; for example: “First things first—safety goggles.” Sometimes it’s used as a joke: “Time to clean the house, but first things first—ice cream.”

In our sermon text this morning, the prophet Elijah tells us, “First things first.” And he’s being completely serious. It’s an invitation to trust. It’s an invitation to act.

**1. “First Things First”—An Invitation to Trust**

Elijah the prophet ministered in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of the wicked King Ahab in the 800s BC. To give the king and his own fellow citizens a spiritual wakeup call, he prophesied that there would be neither dew nor rain for the next few years, and there wasn’t. Even though Elijah issued the prophecy during the rainy season, it stopped raining.

Elijah’s prophecy was both a judgment and a demonstration—and both were related to the idol worship of Baal in which King Ahab was leading the people. There is a carved relief of Baal in Syria dating to the 700s BC which depicts Baal holding a thunderbolt. Baal was a storm and weather god. So God was both punishing the people and their king for worshipping this false god and demonstrating through his prophet Elijah that only he has the power to control the weather. Not only would there not be rain; there wouldn’t even be dew on the ground.

But now Elijah himself is in a bind. First, Elijah certainly was not going to be popular with the people, especially when his prophecy proved to be true. And second, where was he himself going to get food? God solved both of these problems by having Elijah go east of the Jordan River to hide himself in the Kerith Ravine. A ravine in that part of the world, or wadi as it’s more properly called, is dry or has very little water in the summer, but holds water during the rainy season. The LORD told Elijah he could drink from the wadi and that the ravens would feed him there.

And that's what happened. Elijah drank from the wadi and the ravens, which are normally selfish scavengers who fight with each other over food, brought Elijah bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening.

But eventually the wadi dried up and there weren't even any small pools of water hiding anywhere. So we now get to our text where God told Elijah, "Get up! Go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there. I have commanded a woman there, a widow, to provide for you." So Elijah went to Zarephath, a little coastal town along the Mediterranean Sea in the land of Sidon, north of Israel.

When he came to the town gate he saw a woman gathering sticks. To gauge whether this was the woman God had in mind, he asked her to get him some water. If she refused that request, then she certainly wasn't the widow God had commanded to supply him with food. But she was willing, so as she turned to get it, Elijah added, "Please bring me a piece of bread."

Then the woman told him her story, "As surely as the LORD your God lives, I have no food except a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a pitcher. See, I am gathering a couple of sticks so that I can go and prepare it for myself and my son, so that we can eat it and then die." Elijah could tell a few things from this woman's response. First, by now he must have figured this was the widow God told him about, since she only mentioned herself and her son, no husband. Second, the drought and its effects had reached up here beyond Israel too. And third, she knew the true God.

Now when people say, "the LORD *your* God," like this woman did, it is sometimes an indication that they themselves do not follow the true God. When King Saul, for instance, forsook the Lord and his word, that is how he referred to the Lord to Samuel the prophet—"the LORD *your* God." But here it seems to indicate that this widow understood that Elijah was from Israel and that God was first and foremost the God of the Israelites, just as we also confess from the mouth of the apostle Paul that the gospel is "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16). In other words, this seems to be a confession of faith coupled with an expression of deep humility. And rightly so, not only because she was a Gentile, but also because Jezebel, wicked King Ahab's wife who was even worse than her husband, came from this widow's territory. Jezebel learned her idolatrous, Baal-worshipping ways, which she then passed on to her husband who passed them on to his Israelite subjects, from growing up in this widow's land.

But Elijah's responded to this widow, "Do not be afraid. Go and do just as you said. But *first* make a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and bring it out to me. *Then* go and make another for you and your son. For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says. The jar of flour will not run out and the pitcher of oil will not become empty until the day the Lord sends rain to water the surface of the ground." First things first, Elijah says: Make me a loaf of bread before you make one for yourself and your son. Wow, how cheeky on Elijah's part, huh? This woman is about to go and make her and her son's final meal, and Elijah has the nerve to tell her to make him his food first?

Elijah's not being cheeky at all. He is first of all issuing the widow an invitation to trust in God. Jesus himself would later say, "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things"—food, clothing, and shelter—"will be given to you as well." Elijah similarly assures her that if she first sees about supporting the gospel and its ministers, in this case Elijah, the Lord will also see to it that she and her son are supported. If Elijah were a fraud, he would

doubtless have asked her for much more and falsely promised her much more. But no, he asked for a *small* loaf or cake of bread and promised simply that her one jar of flour and her one pitcher of oil would not run out, until God gave rain again, as she continued to provide for Elijah, herself, and her son. He was inviting this woman to trust the Lord, that if she put the work of God's kingdom first by giving the first loaf of bread to God's prophet, then God would see to it that she had enough for herself too, and not just for today, but every day until the drought ended.

## 2. "First Things First"—An Invitation to Action

But you'll notice that the invitation to trust was at the same time an invitation to action. "First *make* a small loaf of bread for me from the flour and *bring it out* to me. Then go and make another for you and your son." If she trusted God's prophet, if she trusted God's word, if she put God's kingdom first in her heart, that trust, that priority, would also show itself in her actions. If first things were first in her heart, then first things would be first in her life.

And she did trust. So she did make Elijah a loaf of bread first. And her trust was well placed: She and her son did have enough every day until the drought ended.

First things first, brothers and sisters. That's first of all an invitation to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. To trust God more than your job or your employer. To trust God more than your strength or ability or equipment. To trust God more than your local, state, or national government. To trust God more than the weather forecast.

To trust God more than all of those things and people because he has earned it. He has earned it, first, by supplying your greatest need. The widow trusted in the LORD because she had learned of the one who was compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love, forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. She learned of the one who would send his Messiah to crush the head of the evil one and undo the damage of sin. She learned of the one who pays special attention to the fatherless, the orphan, and the widow. She learned of the one who is preparing an eternal home in his presence after this short life on earth is over, for all those who trust in him. That's the same Lord you have become acquainted with, only you have also learned how he proved this definitively in the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

God has also earned our trust by keeping his word with regard to all our other needs. Even though God calls upon to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, which also means first supporting the work of God's kingdom, the provision in God's kingdom is by no means limited to God's prophets and pastors and teachers, but to *all* the believers in his kingdom. Yes, God used this widow to provide for Elijah, but in doing so, he also provided for her. By her own admission, she was about to eat her *last* meal and then die. But not anymore. Now, every day, she returned to her jar and her jug and found that they had enough for her to make bread for another day. And God has continued to keep that promise to everyone who has had that priority. "First things first" is first of all an invitation to trust.

But it's also an invitation to put your trust in God into practice. To make the things of the kingdom of God the priority of your prayers. To make your schedule revolve around the things of the kingdom of God, and not to make the things of the kingdom of God revolve around your schedule and to fit into your schedule only when it's convenient. Catechism students, it's an invitation to consider your catechism homework more important than any of your other homework. It's an invitation to give to the work of the kingdom of God the way this widow did

—setting aside the generous amount from our income we plan to use to support the work of God’s kingdom *before* setting aside what we need for taxes, *before* setting aside what we need for groceries or the mortgage, *before* setting aside anything for wants.

And to do this especially since God has proved his word to be true time and time again. God makes a pretty simple promise that he has kept 100% of the time: Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all our other needs will be supplied as well. In Malachi he tells us to test him in the giving of our firstfruits and to see if he will not tear open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that we will not have room enough for it. No one who has ever put the first things first and supported the work of his kingdom first and foremost has ever wanted for support for themselves, has ever wanted for food, clothing, shelter, or any of the other necessities of life. So why do we keep thinking that we’re only going to get ahead by putting other things first? Why do we insist on putting ourselves through that needless stress?

First things first, brothers and sisters. The Lord this woman knew and trusted is the same Lord who continues to come to us in Word and sacrament, day by day, week by week, telling us of his Son who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich. He continues to come to us in Word and sacrament, day by day, week by week, freely announcing to us that our misplaced priorities and idolatry and all our other sins have been freely forgiven for the sake of his Son, freely promising us that he will provide for all our needs every day until the day he calls us to our eternal home in his presence.

“First things first” is the only formula that makes sense with a God as gracious and generous as ours is. Amen.