

Jars — Rev. Denise Stone

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OLD TESTAMENT

1 Kings 17:8–16

⁸ Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ⁹ “Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰ So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹ As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹² But she said, “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.” ¹³ Elijah said to her, “Do not 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.” ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵ She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.

NEW TESTAMENT

John 12:1–11

12 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ² There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" ⁶ (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷ Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

⁹ When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ¹⁰ So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, ¹¹ since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

Today is the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday, where we will turn our attention to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and Holy Week.

Today, we are still on the journey of Lent. In our Lenten Devotional, *Lent in Plain Sight*, by Jill J. Duffield, we have looked each week at common everyday objects: dust, bread, coins, shoes, etc.

In our texts today we find an intersection between the Old and New Testaments in another common object – a jar.

We are all familiar with jars. My mother collected kitchen brownware – so we have two cookie jars, serving jars as well as a myriad of other jars throughout our house. My guess is that many of you could tell similar stories.

Jars are useful objects. They help us accomplish many things.

Both of the texts for this morning involve a woman and her jar. One is a jar for oil and one is a jar for perfume. They sound very dissimilar on the surface. Let's dig a little deeper.

I love the prophet Elijah. His are some of the most amazing and humbling stories you will find in the Old Testament. He confronts Kings and Queens with their idolatry and proclaims God's word that there will be a famine in the land. He then defeats the multiple prophets of Ba'al, after which he runs off to hide in a cave because a Queen has put a price on his head. He cries out to God to take his life. And God feeds him and lets him rest.

Then there is today's story. Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. This little place is in another country, Sidon. The famine is there, too.

God tells Elijah to go for "I have commanded a widow there to feed you." As you read through this story, it doesn't seem like the widow is aware of God's instruction. I wonder how many times we aren't aware of God's instructions and we end up doing them anyway.

Elijah approaches this widow and asks for a drink of water and some bread.

The next words from the woman, if you will hear them again for the first time, are heartbreaking.

As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.

Oh wow.

Many if not most of us gathered here today are parents or grandparents. Can you imagine this mother's anguish?

The famine is so severe, and she has no one other than her son, that she is expecting to make their last meal and then to die of starvation.

Sit with that grief for a moment.

Then Elijah comes along and asks her to make him something to eat – first. The widow could have been angry at this request.

Hear Elijah’s words to her:

Do not 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 the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth.

Verses 15-16 tell us, “She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah.”

A miracle has happened – a miracle of life. A miracle of un-emptying jars.

Let’s turn to look at our New Testament passage.

This is a text you are probably more familiar with than our Old Testament passage.

Jesus is at the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They are holding a dinner for Jesus. There appears to be quite of few people there, at the least some Pharisees.

While they are all reclining at the table (remember they typically sat on the floor), Mary comes over to Jesus with her jar. This time not a jar of oil or meal, but a jar of perfume.

Mary kneels at Jesus' feet and anoints them with the perfume. Then she proceeds to dry Jesus' feet with her hair.

This is not a typical action for the first century. It is certainly not a typical action for today. And yet, Mary breaks societal norms to give all that she had – this jar of perfume – to honor Jesus.

We know that this jar of perfume was probably all that Mary had as Judas complains about this, starting in verse 4.

But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

John's narration gives his opinion of Judas

(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Regardless of Judas' motives in his comments – the value of the perfume is a significant amount. It could have been sold and used to feed many people. Yet, Mary just poured it all out on Jesus' feet.

A number a years ago, I read a chapter on Extravagant Love in a book quoting Anne Ortlund, talking about this story, who pondered how this story could relate to us, today.

Mary broke her vase. Broke it?! How shocking. How controversial. Was everybody doing it? Was it a vase-breaking party? No, she did it all by herself. What happened then? The obvious: all the contents were forever released. She could never hug her precious nard to herself again....

The need for Christians everywhere (nobody is exempt) is to be broken. The vase has to be smashed! Christians have to let the life out! It will fill the room with sweetness. And the congregation will all be broken shards, mingling together for the first time.ⁱⁱ

This is the call of both texts this morning: to let the contents out.

The widow could have refused the prophet's request. She could have put the needs – true needs – or herself and her son first. And the story would have ended in tragedy.

She was willing to listen to and follow through on God words given to her by the prophet of God.

Note something significant in her words to Elijah. In verse 12 she says, “As the LORD your God lives....” She doesn't say “As the LORD our God lives....” She is from a different place and possibly of a different religion – we don't really know – but it is possible and yet she still trusts in the word of Elijah and

Elijah's God. Tragedy is averted. She, her son and the prophet all live – because in faith she made available her jars for the use by God.

Mary, in our New Testament text, similarly makes her jar available for us by God. There is no miracle in Mary's story, but there most certainly is faith.

Verse 7-8: Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

In the Gospel of Matthew's telling of this event, Jesus says,

In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary has been remembered for her act of kindness and devotion. The widow of Zarephath has been remembered for her act of sacrifice and the miracle of unending oil and meal.

Both Mary and the widow made use of their jars in the service of God.

What common, everyday item do you have which could be used in the service of God?

Do you have a jar of oil or perfume whose contents need to be let out?

Is your heart breaking over the incidents of hate and violence against people of color and our Asian brothers and sisters? Do

you need to let your heart lead you to stand up for those who are oppressed? For those who are marginalized?

Do you just need to break out of your normal mode of being in the service of God?

Quoting Anne Ortlund again,

The need for Christians everywhere (nobody is exempt) is to be broken. The vase has to be smashed! Christians have to let the life out! It will fill the room with sweetness. And the congregation will all be broken shards, mingling together for the first time.^{iv}

Think about the “jars” in your life. What can you share, maybe sacrificially, in the service of the Kingdom of God?

Let us pray.

God of the Widow at Zarephath,
God of [Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus],
we stand in awe of people who showed hospitality
in the midst of sacrifice and betrayal.
Take us deep into the heart of hospitality.
Help us to understand that the generosity the world
needs
often demands sacrifice on our part.
Be with those who have never known a table
blessed by laughter and welcome,
who have seldom heard affirmations
and who do not know your abiding love.

Remind us, O God, that we are to set many tables,
to speak blessings often
and to be your love in the world.
In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.^v

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ⁱⁱ <http://getlivingwater.org/sermons/sm100207.htm>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 26:12-13.

^{iv} <http://getlivingwater.org/sermons/sm100207.htm>.

^v Adapted from <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/07/call-to-worship-prayer-radical.html>. Copyright © 2011 Cynthia Langston Kirk. Posted on **Piercing Stories**. <http://www.piecingstories.com/blog/2011/09/05/call-to-worship-and-prayer-radical-hospitality/>