

2019 09 22 – Faith, Hope & Love Enacted

1 Kings 17:8-16

1 Corinthians 13:1-8a,13

Every once in a while I receive an email from Nora Sanders, the General Secretary of The United Church in Canada. Nora is the administrative head of the church, whereas Moderator Richard Bott is our spiritual leader. The *Note from Nora* that I received on Friday began this way:

I headed to the subway, en route to the airport, with my mind on a couple of challenging emails that had landed in my inbox in the past hour, and on the agenda for the next day's meeting with the All Parties Table following up on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work. Sometimes it is so clear that the work yet to be done is so much greater than the things accomplished.

Standing waiting for the subway to arrive, hoping I had given myself enough time to make the connection for the airport bus, I was distracted from my own concerns by the sight of a white haired man who bore a superficial resemblance to our former Governor General. This gentleman was waiting for the train going in the other direction, and as he waited he was busy sorting through the garbage bin on the platform, fishing out a milk carton and drinking what was left in it, and then doing the same with a discarded coffee cup. My heart broke for him. I did something I rarely do, I walked over to him and handed him a five dollar bill and wished him well.

What a paltry offering. I knew that. His needs were far greater than that, and I wasn't able (or willing?) to actually take the time to learn his story and find out how he had come to this. Usually I justify doing nothing for people in need who I encounter on the streets of Toronto on the basis that I support the work of various community ministries that are more able to meet the broader spectrum of needs. Maybe it was as much for myself as for him that I felt the need to make some personal connection..? Maybe it was my own vulnerability and feeling that my efforts are inadequate to achieve the bigger change that I yearn for in our world, that made me want to do something small and concrete..?

<https://us3.campaign-archive.com/?u=ff2087d5fde243a770ed893a8&id=80414eca4d>

I believe Nora's note brings up some of the major questions that we run into when we think about why and how we give, especially why we give to Mission and Service. What is it that motivates us to give our time, our skills and our financial resources to people we don't even know and to those we will probably never meet? Have you ever thought about it? Why do you give?

Today's story from the Hebrew Scriptures is another illustration of charitable giving. Elijah was a prophet, someone who spent his life listening to God (to YHWH) and sharing God's word with the Israelites. In this particular story, a drought had come to the land and Elijah's source of water had dried up so YHWH told Elijah to go to Zarephath, a village in Sidon. There he would find a widow who would supply him with food and water.

The first thing you need to realize is that Sidon was not in Israelite territory. The people that Elijah met there would be strangers, people with a foreign culture and religion. But Elijah followed God's command, went to Zarephath, and found a widow gathering sticks near the town gate. He asked the woman to bring him some water to drink and a piece of bread to eat.

So far, the story is not that different than Nora's story. There is someone in need of help and another person who, we believe, has the means to provide that help. But this is where the story takes "a bit of a turn." We find out the widow has only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in her jug. She's gathering sticks for a fire so she can cook this meagre last meal before she and her child die of starvation. How can this possibly be the widow that God was talking about? How can she be one who is going to feed Elijah?

Elijah is a stranger, someone of a different culture and religion and this widow is already struggling to get by. Why would she help an Israelite who has just arrived at the gate to her town?

Elijah attempts to persuade her by saying, "Don't be afraid!" He assures her that if she shares her meal then somehow that jug of oil and jar of flour will not be used up. Elijah tells the widow that YHWH, the god of the Israelites has assured him that they will all be taken care of. I find it hard to believe that the widow shared her meal because she believed what Elijah was telling her. YHWH wasn't even her God. Why would she believe the words of one of his prophets?

No, I believe that the widow's actions were an act of love. I believe that the widow shared her meal because she recognized that Elijah was a human being, part of God's creation and that, like Nora in the subway, her "heart broke for him." This kind of love is called "agape." It is a kind of love that is not dependent on sexual attraction, affection, or even a familial bond. It is a totally selfless love. It is the kind of love that the apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the church in Corinth.

I have to admit that usually when I am preaching about Paul's love passage, I am at a wedding surrounded by the bride and groom and their attendants. It has been fascinating to think about Paul's words in a different context. You see all the English versions of this passage have been translated from the original Greek. The Greek philosophers had seven different words for love. The word that Paul used in his letter to the church in Corinth was agape.

Agape is a love that is unconditional and universal. It is the kind of love that God has for us. It is the kind of love that we are to have for God's creation. Agape is expressed by caring for those in need, forgiving those who hurt us, loving those who hate us and fighting for justice for those who are oppressed. Agape is a love that leads to Mission and Service.

Why do we give? We give out of love. But it is true that when we give selflessly we also receive. In the subway, Nora realized that it felt good to give in a small and concrete way. She felt a sense of warmth and accomplishment. The widow shared part of her meagre meal with Elijah and discovered that what he had

promised was true. Their food miraculously lasted for the rest of the drought. Agape love is selfless and expects nothing, but, in many ways it is also mutual and reciprocal.

One of the things that I love about the United Church of Canada's Mission & Service Fund is that our global giving is done through partnerships. We don't assume that we know what other people need. Instead the church works with groups on the ground in each country, people who live in the affected area and know their own needs. I believe that makes our giving more mutual, more effective and therefore more beneficial.

There are so many ways that we can help those in need. The Mission and Service Fund is just one way that we as the church express our love for God's creation. Our gifts may be small, like Nora's gift to the man on the subway, or they may be large. They may represent a tiny portion of our wealth or they may require a change in our way of living. They may be an offering of money, or a gift of talent or time. No matter what they look like, as long as our gifts are given with love, they will benefit both the receiver and the giver.