

“Daring Compassion”

I Kings 17:8-16

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I've always loved today's scripture lesson, I think, because the widow woman reminds me of my Grandmother Glimmer. She was widowed and left with a six year old son, my father, to raise alone during the depression. But Grandmother was not only blessed, she was resourceful, and she managed her own small country store out in the middle of no where and provided rather well for my father and herself as well as being helpful to those around her in much less favorable conditions. Grandmother gave away food when food was scarce. She lived frugally and didn't require very much of anything. She always had little cookies that were more like flat cakes waiting for us in the right hand cupboard of her sideboard which now sets in my living room, although without the fresh baked cookies. Grandmother loved coffee and chocolate; two traits I definitely inherited from her.

Today's text about Elijah and the widow shows once again the people of Israel relating to foreigners. I guess I didn't remember how often these international interactions happened until reading the Bible over the last few years, when foreigners have been a common subject of conversation in many circles. Elijah is basically driven out of town by his own Israelite King. Prophets have a way of not being liked by authorities. The Bible says that God provides a way for him to stay alive by the compassion of this non-Israelite, pagan worshipping widow. This widow should not be required to give up her last morsel of food for anyone, even a prophet! No one's going to blame her! Yet, she does.

A few Sundays ago as I lay down for my Sunday afternoon nap, I turned on PBS just to watch a few minutes, but I became caught up in a story about a Japanese diplomat during WWII. Chiune Sigher was born on the first day of the 20th century. His father wanted him to become a doctor, but instead Sigher feels wants to study languages and English literature. Because he defied his father's wishes, Sigher must work odd jobs to pay his own way. He wins a scholarship to study Russian and Sigher becomes a diplomat.

In 1937 Sigher is posted to Helsinki in order to observe Russian movements in the region, and with the start of WWII he is appointed consul to Lithuania, where he opens a one-man consulate where he lives with his family in the upstairs quarters. By chance Sigher meets an 11 year old Jewish boy named Solly Ganor. Solly is in line to pay for a candy bar when he finds himself a little short of money. Sigher gave the boy what he was lacking, and the boy invites him to join the family's Hanukkah celebration. Sigher and his family attends the party, and he is greatly moved by the grim story of Nazi atrocities in Poland told by a recent refugee in attendance. The following year, Russia annexes Lithuania and orders all foreign consulates closed along with Jewish schools and synagogues; Jewish leaders are arrested. Jews are desperate to escape, but they must obtain a series of diplomatic stamps, including entry, transit and exit visas.

On July 27 as Sigher prepares to close his consulate, he wakes up to find hundreds of Jewish refugees massing at the gates. Many of them have obtained entry visas to the Caribbean island of Curacao, but now they need transit visas through Japan in order to request exit visas from Russia, who now is in control of Lithuania. Although Japan is an ally of Germany, Sigher knows what the future holds for the Jews as German troops are on the verge of invading Lithuania. He tries to seek authorization from his foreign ministry to issue the transit visas, but to no avail. So he ignores protocol and begins obsessively writing visas until forced to close his consulate. In all he wrote 2,139 visas over a few weeks' time. Very often entire families were able to escape on a single

visa. He is exhausted when he finally leaves with his family for Berlin, continuing to write visas as he travels through occupied Europe.

Many Jews were able at the last moment to escape the horrors that followed as Germany conquered Lithuania. When the war ends, Sigher is the Japanese consul-general in Romania, and he and his family are interned in a Soviet internment camp for over a year. When they are finally released, they travel across Siberia and eventually reach Japan in 1947. He hopes to resume his career in the foreign ministry; however, he is punished for going against his government and writing the unauthorized visas. He supports his family with menial jobs, eventually working for 16 years in Moscow under an alias while his family remains in Japan.

For over 25 years Sigher had not known what happened to the Jews for whom he issued visas though many Jewish survivors had sought to find him. In 1968 he is finally found by a Jewish survivor and honored for his "daring compassion." He is declared "Righteous Among Nations" at Israel's Holocaust Memorial. Today more than 40,000 people have him to thank for being alive. At the end of the show were moving pictures of families, one after another after another, descendants of Jews whom Sigher had saved. Sigher said this about his decision to write the illegal visas, "I may have disobeyed my government, but if I didn't I would be disobeying God." "In life," he said "do what's right because it's right, and leave it alone." Sigher died at the age of 86. He was a foreigner who dared to do the right thing no matter what.

Like the widow woman, also a foreigner, Sigher offered "daring compassion." The church's mission in the world is to offer "daring compassion". It is a primary reason for the church to BE! It is nice when our best friends are part of our church, and we get to see each other and be together; but that's not primarily why we are the church. We are the church to "love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with our God." "Daring compassion", the kind that may require risks, is why we exist. The "business" of the church is important but only as a means to an end and that end is to collectively be God's hands and feet, God's voice and heart for doing "Daring Compassion!" When we offer daring compassion, even to one person, the good reverberates like the ripples on still water when a stone is dropped upon it.

Throughout history the church, at its best, has been about "daring compassion". I heard a story about one of the lost boys of Sudan who at the age of six had run for two days while being dragged between two older boys running to escape the genocide of their country. A couple heard his story through their church in New York state and adopted the boy who now is a track star at the Univ. of Arizona. He said that when he arrived at his adoptive parents' home, it was like heaven. Now when he runs, he can't help thinking about how it came to be that he can run so fast with such endurance. The church has a voice to cry out for justice and to illuminate ways of showing compassion in this world. Our daring compassion collectively as church takes on an exponential factor even greater than the sum of individual good deeds. It is the power of the Spirit at work among us.

And yet today's lesson reminds us that one foreigner, one widow, one Grandmother, one Sigher, any ONE who risks daring compassion is a force with which to be reckoned. The good news is that Elijah tells the widow woman who is about to give away her last meal, "Do not be afraid!" This refrain echoes throughout scripture to those faced with decisions of ultimate importance. May we find ever new and novel ways, to be people with daring compassion, without fear, and with the courage to take risks and make a difference in this world. AMEN