

“Courageous Compassion”
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I Kings 17:8-16
San Dimas Community Church

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I've always loved today's scripture lesson because the widow woman reminds me of my Grandmother Gilmore. She was widowed and left with a six year old son, my father, to raise alone during the Depression. But Grandmother was resourceful, and she managed her own small country store out in the middle of nowhere and provided well for my father and herself as well as being helpful to those around her in much less favorable conditions during the Depression.

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. These international interactions happen often in the Bible and this particular story is echoed much later in stories where Jesus heals the son of another Syro-Phoenician woman from the same area.

In today's text Elijah has to “get out of Dodge” quickly because King Ahab doesn't like the “word of the Lord” as it comes through the prophet Elijah. The Bible says that God provides a way for him to stay alive by the compassion of this non-Israelite widow who worshipped a pagan god. 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.

Chiune Sigher was born in Japan on January 1, 1900. His father wanted him to become a doctor, but instead Sigher wants to study languages and English literature. Because he defied his father's wishes, Sigher must to pay his own way. He wins a scholarship to study Russian and becomes a Japanese diplomat. In 1937 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 gives the boy the money he needed, and the boy invites him to join the family's Hanukkah celebration. Sigher and his family attend 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 Jew-

ish schools and synagogues; Jewish leaders are arrested. Jews are desperate to escape, but need visas.

On July 27 as Sigher prepares to close his consulate, he wakes up to find hundreds of Jewish refugees massing at the gates. 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.

At the very last moment many Jews are therefore able 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 imprisoned 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 writing the unauthorized visas. He works menial jobs to support his family.

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 "courageous 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. 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.

When one listens to current events in today's world, we realize that the relationships between foreigners and residents, victims and victimizers, powerful and oppressed continue. The names may change but the situations remain.

As one who professes to follow Jesus, I ask "what would Jesus do?" What would Jesus do to help the hungry, the homeless, the Gulf Coast residents whose jobs are gone because I love the lifestyle that oil enables? Would Jesus be cleaning the oil off feathered creatures and restoring life to the lifeless of body and soul?

Would Jesus be on Wall Street or Main Street? What would Jesus say about how I relate to foreigners? Would he be at the border with a gun or working to solve the problems that cause desperate people to where they can earn a living? How would Jesus suggest aide and humanitarian relief reach those who need it? How would Jesus show “courageous compassion?”

One very important verse in this text are the words spoken repeatedly in the Bible at crucial times: “Do not be afraid.” These are the words that free us to be courageous, compassionate, and generous. These are the words that free us from retreating into self-protection and self-preservation as individuals and even as countries.

When I feel that I might be taken advantage of or harmed, I get very anxious. I need to be reminded of these words: “Do not be afraid” because if I act from a place of compassion and courage rather than withdrawing into protection mode, I like myself much better.

Like the widow woman who fed Elijah and Japanese diplomat who helped Jews to safety, the church’s mission is to offer this same “courageous 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. When we offer courageous compassion, even to one person, the good reverberates like the ripples on still water when a stone is dropped upon it. It is the power of the Spirit at work among us.

Today’s lesson reminds us that one foreigner, one widow, one Grandmother, one Sigher, any ONE who risks courageous 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.