

“The Golden Cork”
1 Kings 17:8-16
Luke 21:1-4

Browns Brothers, one of Australia’s most acclaimed wineries, used a novel approach in marketing its Pinot Grigio last year. The winery placed 5 golden corks in 5 bottles of their wine. The lucky people to find the golden cork would win a lifetime's supply of wine! If you enjoy the fruit of the vine, that’s a pleasant thought, though *lifetime* is defined as six bottles per month for 25 years.¹

Given the current cost of gasoline, an even more pleasant thought might be a lifetime supply of gasoline. Sometime ago, BP (companies like to hide behind their initials these days, so if you don’t like buying British Petroleum, call it “Better Petroleum”) ran a sweepstakes offering just that, a lifetime supply of gas, including a new tank to put it in. The winner got a Ford truck, every five years, for life.²

To have a lifetime supply of something you want – how good is that!? Even better would be to have a lifetime supply of what you need. Take water, for instance. They say future wars will be fought over water, not oil. The severe drought that has gripped portions of our country reminds us, if we need reminding, that we can’t live without water. We can’t live without that which can only be given to us.

That’s a segue to today’s story from the first book of Kings. The setting is in a time of drought, some 900 years or so before Christ. Ahab is king of Israel and had been ruling for 22 years. As far as kings go, we’ll let the Bible speak for itself:

Ahab .. did even more open evil before God than anyone yet – a new champion in evil! It wasn't enough for him to copy the sins of [other kings]; no, he went all out, first by marrying Jezebel daughter of [the] king of the Sidonians, and then by serving and worshiping the god Baal. He built a temple for Baal in Samaria, and then furnished it with an altar for Baal. Worse, he went on and built a shrine to the sacred whore Asherah. He made the God of Israel angrier than all the previous kings of Israel put together.³

Even if Ahab’s reign had some good points, you can imagine that if you marry someone named Jezebel, you won’t get good press. Remember Frankie Lane? He died this past February just a few weeks shy of his 94th birthday. Remember a song he made famous?

Jezebel.
Jezebel.

If ever the devil was born,
Without a pair of horns
It was you,
Jezebel, it was you.

If ever a pair of eyes,
Promised paradise.

Deceiving me, grieving me,
Leavin' me blue.
Jezebel, it was you.

'Twould be better I had never known,
a lover such as you.
Forsaking dreams and all,
For the siren call of your arms.

Like a demon, love possessed me,
You obsessed me constantly.
What evil star is mine,
That my fate's design,
Should be Jezebel?

Idon't know what prompted the writing of that song, but Ahab could have sung it. A short summary of his reign is heard in this verse: **“Ahab, pushed by his wife Jezebel and in open defiance of God, set an all-time record in making big business of evil.”**⁴

Because Ahab made a big business of evil, God's prophet, Elijah, pronounced this judgment: “It's never going to rain again until I say so!”⁵ Elijah brought on the drought. Knowing Ahab's nature, God told Elijah to run for his life. God directed him to a brook where he could get water and also provided ravens to bring him food every day. When the brook dried up for lack of rain, God directs him to a town in Sidon called, Zarephath. It, too, is in a drought, but there was also a poor widow there who ministered to Elijah.

There's a couple of things not to like about this story. Why didn't God direct Elijah to a person of some means. Why send him to a widow which in those days was synonymous with poverty. She didn't even have kindle in her kitchen with which to build a fire. Elijah first meets her as she is gathering sticks. Perhaps God sent him to the widow because it is God's nature to choose the weak in the world to shame the strong.⁶

Another thing about this story, Elijah sounds so abrupt and insensitive. “Bring me some water to drink and, while you're at it, a little bread to go with it.” She only had enough food to prepare one more meal for herself and her son and who knows how long that would nourish them before they died. Couldn't Elijah, a great prophet, see that?

Of course Elijah talks with a woman he had never seen before. That may not bother us but it violated Jewish law at the time. Not only is he talking to a woman, he is talking to a Gentile woman, a pagan, a likely worshiper of the god Baal. Coincidentally, more likely providentially, she lives in the same country in which Jezebel was raised as daughter of the king. Let's not miss the irony – this pagan land that honors a fertility god who's supposed to keep everything lush and green and fertile is just as dried up and barren as other lands around it. Who ultimately provides for this widow in a time of drought? The God of Israel!

Elijah said to her: “Trust me. If you honor my request, you won't run out of food and water.” She did trust him and she didn't run out of food. It's as if she found one of those golden corks, but one that brought her something better than a lifetime of wine – a lifetime of life's necessities. **“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.”

Don't bog down in arguing whether a story such as this is history or folklore, or whether or not miracles like that really happened. Miracles like that *happen* when people acknowledge that everything they have is a gift from God and when they are willing to share with others the resources God has given them. Miracles happen!

At a meeting a few weeks ago, the Board of Deacons was faced with significant requests by some folk who found themselves up against a brick wall. To respond to them as they needed would draw down considerably the Deacon fund. The discussion centered around how low the fund should be allowed to go before the Deacons had to say “NO”! Someone suggested that we not worry about it and if the fund fell to zero because the Deacons were responding to people's needs, so be it. Everyone soon agreed. If that happened, they would let it be known and God would no doubt provide through the resources of you, the congregation.

Miracles won't happen, however, if we follow the world's script. The world's script says, “You can't be too careful. You have to save something for a rainy day,” though what constitutes a rainy day is never defined. God's script says, “When there is need, you administer the resources you have, no matter how meager they may be.”

Walter Brueggemann, one of the most exciting and insightful scholars of the Bible in our time, often writes and talks about “The Liturgy of Abundance and The Myth of Scarcity.”⁷ He suggests that money has become a kind of narcotic for us and that the more we have, the less generous people are. (Maybe that's the reason God sent Elijah to a poor widow.) “We have a love affair with ‘more’ – and we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us, and the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us withstand it.”

Brueggemann points out that the Biblical story begins with a liturgy of abundance. Everything is good and God blesses it all with vitality by saying, “be fruitful and multiply.” You have to hear this man in person to appreciate his dry wit, but he writes, “In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creator spirit. And as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, ‘I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office.’”

Towards the end of the Book of Genesis, the Egyptian Pharaoh dreams there will be a famine in the land. “Pharaoh organizes to administer, control and monopolize the food supply. He introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy. For the first time in the bible, someone says, ‘There's not enough. Let's get everything.’”

To make a long story short, most of us live by the myth of scarcity because we are gripped by fear. Brueggemann tells of Martin Niemoller, the German pastor who opposed Adolf Hitler. As a young man, however, Martin was part of a delegation of church leaders who met with Hitler in 1933. Niemoller stood at the back of the room and observed, but didn't say anything. When he went home, his wife asked him what he had learned that day. Niemoller replied, “I discovered that Herr Hitler is a terribly frightened man.” See where fear can take us?

The widow in our story was not without fear, but by God's grace, her fear evaporated before Elijah.

He said, “trust me” and she did. God says, “trust me.” Will we? We’ve become consumers at heart. We long for the easy fix. For example, when gambling in Las Vegas was not enough, along came Atlantic City. Still not enough – slots are turning up in race tracks everywhere. That has led to casinos in every nook and cranny of just about every state in the union. In today’s *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Chris Satullo uses the word *metastasize* in reference to the proliferation of gambling sites. That’s a perfect word to describe this societal cancer. There are so many casinos now that those bus loads of retirees will have trouble deciding in which direction to head! Not to worry. They won’t have to travel far to find one, and go they will. It’s as if people honestly believe that finding the golden cork would bring them a lifetime of happiness.

When the bulletin was ready to go to press, I still didn’t have a sermon title. Not having anything catchy, I looked at the story about the wine and thought, “The Golden Cork” might work. No sooner had the bulletin been printed when the words of a familiar hymn started going through my head. Please open your Hymnals to #439. We’re not going to sing this, but I’d like you to read the second verse and meditate on it for a moment.

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere
Their high communion find:
His service is the golden cord
Close binding humankind.⁸

It’s not a golden cork that will serve us and save us. Serving in the name of Jesus Christ will. The hymn likens such service as a *golden cord* which binds us together in our common humanity and disperses our fears. As Ghandi once said, “There’s enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.” We need the golden cord, not the golden cork!

1. http://www.tourismvictoria.com.au/piecesofvictoria/may_2006/?page=07
2. *Homiletics Magazine*, June 2007, Volume 19, #3, p. 52
3. 1 Kings 16:30-34 (*The Message*)
4. 1 Kings 21:25 (*The Message*)
5. 1 Kings 17:1
6. 1 Corinthians 1:27
7. *The Christian Century*, March 24-31, 1999
8. *In Christ There Is No East or West*, John Oxenham, 1908