

Proper 27, Year B

- While I was in seminary, I took the opportunity to write a master's thesis
- Subject was anointing in the rite of Baptism - I think it's a pretty important part of our baptismal liturgy, and that oil is an extremely rich symbol - so naturally I did what anyone would do: spent the entirety of a semester researching it to the fullest degree possible and then wrote a paper on it - don't worry, Loren made fun of me for being such a nerd the whole time
- But it means I spent a **lot** of time thinking about anointing with oil, reading about oil, thinking about oil
- If you ever want to hear anyone talk at *length* about what oil signifies and how it was used in late antiquity, I am your guy
- And so any time that oil comes up in the lectionary, my ears perk up
- Means you can imagine my delight when I saw that this morning we would be reading story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath from 1 Kings
- We don't get the entirety of this miraculous story in our reading this morning, but we get enough - it's funny, but because of the way the lectionary works, we actually got more or less the end of Elijah's story back in August - and if you were here then, you heard me tell the beginning of Elijah's story, so as to set the stage for that later part
- Well, today, almost three months later, we're back at the beginning of Elijah's story - learning again the lesson God wants us to know through this miraculous feeding
- And it is quite miraculous - God tells Elijah to go to Zarephath, and there he'll find a widow to feed him - so Elijah does, and instead of finding a woman ready to feed him, he finds a woman ready to use the last tiny bit of food that she has left
- Sent to find abundance, Elijah finds only scarcity
- If ever we find ourselves feeling hopeless - we have a patron saint in the widow of Zarephath - this poor woman who had resigned herself to cooking her own last meal - and her son's
- In a move that would seem to be of dubious pastoral sensitivity, Elijah tells her to go ahead and make him something to eat anyway - basically asks to eat her last meal!
- Only then clarifies that God will make that tiny bit oil and meal last until the rains return
- And Elijah is right - that tiny bit of oil and that tiny handful of meal last and last - God stretches even that little bit much farther than either of them could've imagined
- This is what I love about the symbol of oil - it helps illustrate this one simple fact: God's

abundance is all around us

- It's just what oil **is** - it's the liquid that is basically ready to burst out of the most common fruit in the Middle Eastern setting of Scripture
- As olive trees grow, their fruit just gets fuller and fuller and fuller, until you can just squeeze the abundance out of them and use it for all kinds of things - olive oil cleans, it enriches food, it burns for light and heat, it helps with healing - and it's made use of to illustrate God's abundant, overflowing goodness
- By sharing what little she has, the widow of Zarephath learns about just how much God cares for her, for her and her son's well-being - just how deeply God is willing to provide for her, and just how deeply she depends on God's providence - and about just how much God can do with what seems to us to be very little
- Her tiny bit of oil keeps flowing, and flowing, and flowing - God's abundance never dries up
- And in the Gospel, we have another treasured story, especially for this congregation: the one known as the widow's mite - it's a story you see every week when you come here, as it's a story we tell in our stained glass - you might even recognize the image on the cover of your bulletins
- In this passage, another widow shows us the way, shows us God's abundance and generosity - shows us the shape of hope
- Even when she feels as though she has nothing left, she gives of what little she seems to have - and Jesus commends her for her generosity, saying that everyone else gave out of their abundance but that she, in her seeming scarcity, gives generously nonetheless
- And the lesson of the story of the widow's mite isn't merely that you should follow her example - we are, of course, meant to emulate her example of generosity, of leaning into the abundance of God and sharing with and caring for others even when our abundance may not be obvious
- But just as important in this story is that Jesus notices this
- Jesus sees what the woman does - sees her sacrifice and honors her because of it, lifts her up as an example because of it
- In other words, God isn't oblivious to or uncaring about our sacrifices, especially those made in God's name
- And the point isn't that we should be generous or give sacrificially so that we get noticed by God - but we should know that when we are generous, when we do give sacrificially for

the sake of others - God cares, God notices - God isn't going to ignore us, should we ever be in need

- Both of these stories are stories about generosity - about the ways in which we are called to share of ourselves and of the gifts that God has given us
- But even more than that, both are stories of God's abundance - that God recognizes and remembers the sacrifices that we make - that God provides for our needs, even miraculously if need be
- Both of these women are examples of saying "forget about despair," even when there seems to be cause for it and instead being generous, being hopeful that God's abundance is exactly what it seems to be - illogical, uncanny, unexpected
- It defies explanation - and so when words fail, we rely upon symbols - symbols like an olive, hanging on a tree, full to bursting with abundance, ready to meet so many of the world's needs