

A SHUNAMMITE WOMAN HELPS

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Unit: Old Testament People of Commitment – Part II

1. Purpose
 - a. to explore what was involved in the commitments of these 4 people and how their decisions affected their lives
 - b. to find guidance for our own commitments to God.
2. Theme: a commitment to God can involve unforeseen risks, but will provide unforeseen blessings as well.
3. Lessons
 - a. The Shunammite woman – demonstrated her commitment in seemingly small acts of hospitality to one of God’s prophets.
 - b. The prophet Nathan – his commitment to God required him to challenge those in authority.
 - c. Esther the queen – also had to take the risk of confronting a king in order to protect God’s people from annihilation.
 - d. The prophet Isaiah – lived in a time of comfort but was called to deliver an uncomfortable message to the people.

B. Today’s Lesson

1. Setting
 - a. Political
 - The story takes place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Joram (aka Jehoram) who ruled from 850-842 BC.
 - It was ~100 years after the death of King Solomon and the splitting of his kingdom into northern and southern divisions.
 - It was also ~100 years before the rise of Assyria to power which would eventually destroy the Northern Kingdom.
 - b. Geographical
 - The village of Shunem was about 20 miles SW of the Sea of Galilee in territory originally designated for the tribe of Issachar.
 - Shunem was on an east-west road that ran through the Jezreel Valley from the Mediterranean coast over to the Jordan River valley.
 - It was roughly at the halfway point from valley to coast and would have been a good stopping place for any traveler.
 - Shunem was a small village, probably consisting of only a few dozen houses.
 - There were no city walls like those surrounding the neighboring cities of Jezreel or Megiddo, which meant that if an invader approached, the villagers had to flee to one of these walled cities for protection.

c. Religious

- This was a time when the people of Israel continued to turn away from God and worship Canaanite fertility idols.
- The story takes place during the ministry of the prophet Elisha who followed in the footsteps of Israel's greatest prophet, Elijah.
- Elijah had ministered during the reign of King Joram's parents, Ahab and Jezebel.
- Under the direction of Ahab and Jezebel a temple was built in Samaria for the worship of the Canaanite god, Baal, and Baal worship became a state-sponsored religion in Israel.
- While Joram did not support Baal worship as strongly as his parents, he did allow it to continue along with other idolatrous practices.
- In order to worship the God, the people of Israel were dependent on having priests to lead them and places of worship available throughout the land, but with Baal worship being so prevalent, it was confusing as to who they should worship and more difficult to worship the one true God.
- In some areas it was even dangerous to worship God because of the opposition from Baal followers.

2. Characters

a. Elisha

- Succeeded Elijah and ministered in the Northern Kingdom, Israel, for ~50 years.
- His ministry was characterized by a number of miraculous events, but also by his compassion for people in need.
- Apparently Elisha made regular trips from his hometown (Abel-meholah) in the Jordan Valley over to Mt. Carmel on the Mediterranean coast to pray and meditate on the lessons of his predecessor, Elijah.
- Mt. Carmel was holy ground—recall it was on Mt. Carmel that Elijah had confronted the prophets of Baal, and God sent fire to consume the drenching wet sacrifice he offered and give him a miraculous victory over the Baal prophets.

b. The woman

- She is described as a woman of means (“well-to-do”).
- The Bible doesn't say where the wealth came from; it could have been inherited, she may have married into it or she could have somehow been instrumental in helping her husband acquire it.
- She was a woman of some spiritual discernment; she recognized the spiritual side of life, she recognized that Elisha was God's prophet.
- She was kind and compassionate.
- She was a person of action; she solicited her husband's support, but she is the one who takes the lead.

II. SCRIPTURE

A. Read 2 Kings 4:8

1. Why was hospitality important in Bible times?

- a. Hospitality was especially important to 2 groups of people.
 - (1) Travelers
 - Travel in those days was slow and difficult, often on foot and very few accommodations were available for overnight stays.
 - The arid climate and desert-like terrain could make access to food and water a matter of life and death.
 - As a result, hospitality toward travelers became a required practice among most people living in the Middle East.
 - (2) Resident aliens
 - These were foreigners who lived in town (e.g., Ruth).
 - They had no established support structure in the community.
 - Leviticus 19:34 says, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt..."
 - b. A "law of hospitality" developed among the peoples of the ancient Middle East.
 - According to R. de Vaux, showing hospitality to travelers, including strangers in the land, was an honor and the host received much status for doing so.
 - However, the unwritten law said, in general, if you share a meal with someone, then you are responsible for the protection and well being of that person during the meal and for a length of time after the meal.
 - The length of time varied among different peoples and customs, but was typically about 3 days, or the time until "the salt he has eaten has left his stomach".
 - Failure to uphold this law was thought to bring a curse on the host.
2. Does the NT encourage Christians to practice hospitality?
- a. Yes, in Romans 12:13 Paul instructs his readers to "share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."
 - b. The book of Hebrews encourages us to show hospitality to strangers because we may be entertaining angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2)
 - c. Some writers have compared hospitality to grace saying Christians have received grace from God and are challenged to extend grace to others.
 - One way to do that is by showing hospitality to other people.
 - 1 Peter 4:9-10 says, "Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift you have received."
- B. Read verses 9-10
1. These verses tell us the woman and her husband added a room to their house specifically for Elisha to use whenever he traveled through Shunem.
 - a. They probably had a typical mud-brick house with a flat roof.
 - b. Adding a room would not be that difficult, but still would have required some effort and resources.
 2. Even though this woman was "well-to-do", do you see her actions here as going above and beyond what was normally expected in showing hospitality? (Yes)

- a. Why do you think she went so far in showing hospitality:
 - did she want something from Elisha?
 - she knew Elisha was God's prophet; were her actions simply evidence of her devotion and commitment to God?
 - b. B. Harbour commentary:
 - Some people show kindness to others only because they want something from them.
 - They hope to put them in their debt and wait for some opportune time to call in a marker (e.g. *The Godfather*).
 - In contrast, this woman demonstrated a form of hospitality and kindness that does not ask for a receipt or expect an equal response.
3. How far do you think God expects us to go in demonstrating our commitment to Him?
 - a. Would it include something as drastic as re-modeling our home?
 - Would you add a room to your house to be able to take in a traveler in need?
 - b. What are some ways we could practice "Shunammite hospitality" today?
 - Go with mission teams to help with disaster relief and rebuilding?
 - Provide a welcome, information etc. to newcomers moving into the neighborhood?
 - Would supporting programs like Urban Ministries and IHN qualify?
 - What about stopping to help people with car trouble or accidents on the road?
 - c. Does God expect us to take risks in living out our commitment to Him?
 4. The woman certainly extended gracious hospitality to Elisha, do you think she showed this same hospitality to other travelers?
 - a. More specifically, do you think she allowed other travelers to use the room or was it always reserved for Elisha?
 - b. Was this one of the unforeseen risks of adding another room—would she feel pressure to take in other travelers who may not be people of God?
 5. Speaking of risks, by showing such hospitality to Elisha—a man known to speak for the one true God—do you think she was taking a risk of, in effect, making a religious and political statement that might offend some people, including perhaps those in power?
 - By the same token, was what she did an effective witness for God to her neighbors and others who might hear about her hospitality?
- C. Read verses 11-13
1. Elisha is grateful for the woman's hospitality and would like to show his gratitude in some tangible way.
 - a. How does the woman respond to Elisha's offer?
 - b. What do you think she means by her statement, "I have a home among my own people"?
 - She was saying she was content and had everything she needed.
 - The woman didn't want her act of hospitality to become a service rendered

for a fee, something Elisha paid for.
 - She wanted it to remain a gift.

2. Harbour commentary

- a. The woman's response reflects 2 wonderful characteristics that every Christian should strive for: humility and gratitude.
- b. Humility: the opposite of "entitlement".
 - Entitlement claims that we are owed something because we deserve it.
 - This woman reflects humility by recognizing that she has already been blessed beyond what she deserves.
- c. Gratitude: the opposite of an insatiable desire for more.
 - This woman reflects gratitude by finding comfort and satisfaction in the things she already has.

3. When you show hospitality to someone or provide some other selfless or sacrificial service, should you expect anything in return?

- a. What about a little gratitude from the person you help?
 - Lesson writer: If you expect some *measurable* expression of gratitude from other people, then there is nothing selfless or sacrificial about your good deeds. ...Whenever hospitality results in a payment, it becomes a transaction and not selfless service.
 - Agree/disagree?
- b. So is it wrong to expect a little gratitude?
 - Lesson writer: Expectancy for repayment is a sign that we are showing hospitality not for God's sake but for our own.
- c. On the other hand, if someone insists on showing their gratitude in some tangible way, should we resist it or graciously accept it as a way of continuing to show kindness to them?

D. Read verses 14-17

1. Why was having children, especially sons, so important to OT people?
 - a. Having children was seen as the way to continue the family bloodline and history.
 - b. More importantly, children were viewed as blessings from God.
 - A barren woman was suspect, viewed as somehow being out of favor with God.
 - Recall the anguish of barren families named in the Bible: Sarah and Abraham, Samuel's parents or in the NT, John the Baptist's parents.
2. Elisha tells the woman she will have a son next year.
 - a. How does she react—does she reject this idea?
 - No, but she does indicate that this is a very serious and important subject to her—something not to be treated lightly.
 - b. Do you think her response suggests that she has been down this road before and was then disappointed—and she doesn't want to go through that again?
 - c. Elisha has touched upon a very sensitive part of this woman's life, yet she does not lose herself in anger or a negative response.

- She lets her feelings be known while maintaining great respect for the prophet.
 - Notice that she still refers to him as “lord” and “man of God”, and to herself as “servant”.
3. Elisha does not argue with her or try to make her understand.
 - a. He simply allows the proof of the prophecy to be in its fulfillment.
 - b. And indeed she does have a son, born the next year just as Elisha said.
 4. Because of her hospitality, the Shunammite woman was unexpectedly blessed with a son.
 - a. Can you think of any examples where your hospitality or other good deeds have come back to bless you in unexpected ways?
 - b. In your experience do good deeds have a way of blessing us with more than we gave up to do them?

III. DISCUSSION

A. Importance of Hospitality

1. Lesson writer: Nothing illustrates our commitment to God more than showing care and hospitality to strangers.
2. Why do you think this might be true?
(Because as Christians we are called to extend God’s love and care to people in need—recall the “inasmuch” parable in Matthew 25.)

B. In the first instance the Shunammite woman apparently had a chance encounter with Elisha and spontaneously offered hospitality.

1. But after that first encounter, she uses her resources, changes her household and makes an intentional, planned effort to offer hospitality on a regular basis.
2. As a church, should we simply encourage members to offer hospitality whenever they happen to encounter a need, or should we expand our efforts and offer more planned or programmed ways to extend hospitality?
 - Have we done this to some extent already through Temple House, Temple Toolers, participation in IHN and Urban Ministeries?
 - Where do we go from here—expand our efforts with more of the same or move in a different direction?
 - See Will Willimon story of Florida church and homeless men.
(www.csec.org/csec/sermon/willimon_3329.htm)