

Universal need: 1 Kings 17:8-24; Luke 7:11-17

by [Herbert O'Driscoll](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

As we struggle to stay alert to the constant demands of the needy, we pastors sometimes forget that we take for granted others in our congregations who seem strong and whole. This applies particularly to those men and women whom we instinctively count on as the backbone or the core of the congregation. Their presence on committees and boards, projects and task forces, and their willingness to serve—sometimes at great cost of time to themselves—can blind us to their needs. A simple but often unrealized truth about us all is that strength can hide need, and resilience and faithful service can hide vulnerability.

Elijah the Tishbite is one of the most resilient, faithful servants in the Old Testament. Yet even he, this man who is a formidable presence, reaches a point of dire need, both physical and emotional. As he moves through the kingdom he is regarded as the leader in what is becoming a massive struggle to establish the true nature of God and how this God should be worshiped. He has even confronted Ahab the king and announced to the ruler that the land is about to face drought and famine.

Soon after this meeting, however, Elijah finds himself struggling to survive. First he heads across the Jordan to find water, and for a while the small river Cherith sustains him. Then it dries up, and he heads northwest toward the coastlands of southern Syria, to a village named Zarephath. It is possible that he was familiar with this area from earlier campaigns.

By the time he reaches Zarephath, Elijah is in serious trouble. There is a note of desperation in the way he pleads for a little water from the first human being he encounters. As she turns to respond to his need he risks a further appeal. Can she provide—note Elijah's words—even "a morsel of bread"?

The reply he receives tells him that this woman is in the same state. Both are almost at the end of their ability to survive. Every word she utters is filled with exhaustion and resignation. "I have nothing . . . a handful of meal . . . a little oil . . . so [that my son and I] may eat and die."

At this low moment hope flickers in Elijah. Initially, when we hear him ask that she provide for him first and only then for herself and her young son, we think him selfish and demanding. But what he is asking for is the first all-important bit of nourishment that will allow him to help support all three of them. His energy and his resilience added to hers will make the difference. Together they can search for food, and the combined effort will infuse both of them with hope. Mean while, in her terrible need and weakness, she has the power to make the difference between life and death for a great public figure who can walk with kings but at this moment crouches and staggers before her, utterly dependent on her generosity.

Together they make it. They survive. Life goes on. Until . . . in the mysterious cruelty and unpredictability of life in that region the woman's child is suddenly moaning in agony. In the terror of the moment, deep, unmentioned feelings are revealed. Guilt wells up in this terrified woman, and Elijah suddenly finds himself the focus of raw, searing anger and resentment. In a flash Elijah becomes a fearful threat.

In desperation Elijah takes the child into his arms and lays him on his bed. Enveloping the child with his own body, he strains to become the channel for life as he pleads with God to be its source. He cries and pleads and calls.

Suddenly there is quiet, calm, then a stirring, a sound of movement on the rough wooden steps, and a cry from the mother as she stretches out her arms, her voice quivering with exhaustion. Elijah announces, "Your son is alive," and at that moment the God of Elijah is vindicated in this foreign land.

There is much here that cannot be expressed without story. Only narrative can convey the depths and subtleties of human relationship and human emotion. Only the effort to relive the moment by telling the story can bring its powerful nuances across time to our world.

Centuries later Jesus will use this encounter to speak to the congregation of his Nazareth synagogue about God's inclusive love and mercy. Perhaps it will come to him again as he watches a sad line of mourners shambling distractedly through the village gate of Nain. Perhaps he'll notice a mother demented with grief and will learn that she's a widow who has lost her only son.

Luke seems to echo deliberately the ancient encounter of Elijah and the widow and her son. We are told that Elijah "gave him to his mother." Now Luke tells us that Jesus, having given life to this young man, "gave him to his mother."

Somewhere in the future, another powerful leader will be lifted up by the risen Christ. In today's epistle passage we hear a centurion pleading for acceptance and understanding and forgiveness. One day Saul of Tarsus, wishing desperately to be regarded and trusted as apostle Paul, will hunger and thirst for these same things: acceptance, understanding and forgiveness.

We know that Paul's pleas will one day be answered. He will be made whole by the acceptance and care of the community of the One whom he once wished to destroy.