**Sermon 1 Kings 17:8-16**

OPENING STORY

Rachel McIlwaine was the first of my friends to get her driving license, and have a car. An 1987 reddish-maroon 2-door manual gear-shift, 1.0 engine, Opel Corsa, I just not sure that they sell cars this small in the States. One evening, driving home after something at school, Rachel driving, me in the passenger seat and Helen Boyd in the back. It’s dark and we’re winding around twisty Irish roads, maybe going a little speedy over heights, blasting music from the cassette deck…and suddenly the car starts making a chugging, chunking noise, and grinds to a halt.

We’re 16-17 years old, in the dark on a country road, no cell phones and no sense. We have a cool, calm and collected conversation to decide what to do [SHAKE HEAD], argue about the flaws in the plan, and finally decide that we could do nothing but walk the half a mile back up the road to a two-story farm house with lights on. Rachel, being the least keen to walk, decides to stay with the car and sends me and Helen out into the dark.

We reach this house. And elderly lady answers the door and lets us use the phone to call my Dad and in the meantime invites us to have a cup of tea and some banana bread before we start the 10min walk back to Rachel (we didn’t bring any banana bread back)…who we can hear blaring N’Sync before we can see that has responsibly turned her flashing hazard lights one.

We wait for Dad, when he comes, he immediately gets to work checking out the tires first, then lifting the hood, questioning us on the exact sounds the car made as it died, and has us turn the key. Finally asks… “is there any juice in her?” Which for those of you who are not Northern Irish, means did you forget to put gasoline in your vehicle…ughhh… “well cutties, you’ll not get far runnin’ on empty.”

LINK

My Dad taught us 3 cutties (that’s girls for you Americans), he taught us more than the most basic car maintenance that night. He taught us to be observant, to check and double check our vehicles before we set out in them. Air in the tires, Washer fluid topped up. Jumper-cables and jack in the trunk. And yes, gas in the tank.

We were so embarrassed not to have realized our error. “You’ll not get far runnin’ on empty.”

That phrase has rung in my ears in so many different occasions in my life…but never again in relation to my car. I wonder if you know what it feels to have nothing left in the tank. When it simply enough get up out of bed, haul ourselves to the shower, and brush our teeth can feel like a monumental feat. That kind of ‘runnin on empty.’

When the house is a wreck, and the fridge is empty, and dust-bunnies have taken over the living room. When you’re tired, and it doesn’t seem to matter how much sleep you get, it never seems to be enough. When the worries of the world (especially maybe the world closest to home) just seem heavy and overwhelming…and you’re running on nothing but fumes. Friends, it’s in those moments that I hear the prophetic words of my father, “you’ll not get far runnin’ on empty.”

I believe that when we meet Elijah in our story today, he is barely running on fumes.

TEXT

The creek where he’s been hunkering down to be fed by birds during a drought, has finally dried up and without water Elijah knows he won’t survive long. He is forced to consider his next course of action, and without anyone else there to confer with, we are told that he senses God calling him to move again. This time to a town called Zarephath. “I have commanded a widow woman there to provide for you,” says Yahweh. So, Elijah goes…driven by faithful obedience or desperation…it’s hard to say. But he leaves his encampment by the creek and sets out for this port city 85 miles away to solicit a widow woman for food and water.

After probably week of travel, Elijah approaches the edge of Zarephath and spot a women, dressed like a widow, gathering firewood. After hearing a little of her story, Elijah says in verse 13, [PAUSE] “Fear not.” “Fear not.”

This phrase, ‘fear not,’ or ‘do not be afraid,’ *angers* me so much. It assumes that fear and faith cannot coexist. That somehow faith without fear will carry us through life’s greatest hardships *but* it so-often seems to fly in the face of reality. The reality that there are frightening things out there in the world, and inside our own hearts and minds.

And I’m not talking about being scared of spiders or public speaking, I’m talking about struggling with addiction and mental illness, I talking about horrific diagnoses and losing the ones we love, I’m talking about broken trust and difficult relationships, about our own sense of purpose, worth and meaning. I’m talking about poverty and injustice and climate crises, and threats to democracy. Because, when I am ‘running on empty,’ it’s because of *those* things. And when I’m going on nothing but fumes, ‘fear not’ doesn’t cut it. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ doesn’t cut it.

So, given my frustration with Elijah’s command to the widow to not be fearful, which sounds like he hasn’t listened to a single thing she has said. I went back to the Hebrew and tried to sharpen some of those seminary skills again. And I discovered that another legitimate translation of Elijah words here, is not an imperative, a command statement, “Fear not!” but an invitation, [PAUSE] “Let *us* not be afraid…” “Let *us* not be afraid…”

Friends, I cannot express what a difference this makes for this encounter, and for any moment when we feel like we are running on empty, on nothing but fume. “Let *us* not be afraid…”

Have a look again to what Elijah says to the widow in verses 13 and 14, and insert this new understanding, here is my new paraphrase of these two verses: *“Let us not be afraid; you see both of us are hungry, both of us are at our wit’s end, we’re running on empty and desperate; so go and do what you already have committed to doing, just make me a little bit of bread, make yourself and your child a little bit of bread, and let us trust the God of all gods together to provide for us both, at least until this drought ends.”*

Phew!

CONCLUSION

Friends, ‘digging deep’ is not something you want to do alone, particularly when you are ‘running on empty’. In situations of desperation, need, and of hardship it can been tempting to hunker down, keep private and to ourselves, not reach out, not be truly honest and vulnerable about our circumstances.

We may even try to push through, and ignore the fact that our tanks our empty and we are trying to keep going, keep helping others, keep saying yes to tasks and responsibilities…but hear this truth “you’ll not get far runnin on empty.” We have all absorbed messages from the world that have convinced us that being independent, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, figuring things out on our own is the only ‘right’ way, we are supposed to be an ‘adult’ in this world.

But friends, that is *not* the way we are designed and that is *not* the way the church is designed, and that is not the way Elijah was designed, or the way the widow was designed.

I heard a thing recently that said that every animal and plant is born with an innate capacity to do the thing that they most need to survive throughout their lives. Some plants have adapted to life in dry hot deserts and store moisture in their short, thick stems. Gray whales migrate thousands of miles every year to warm water in the winter and cool water in summer. Deer learn to walk and run within an hour of being birthed, to avoid predators. AND human babies cry…which, is the unspoken way we ask for help. And then as we grow up, we unlearn the very thing that we were created to instinctually do, ‘cry for help,’ when we are hungry, angry, lonely, or tired, when we are ‘running on empty.’

Well, church ‘Let us not be afraid,’ let us dig deep *together,* let us weather the hardships of life *together*, let us face the unknowns *together*, let us be generous with our resources *together*, let us share with one another our time and our talents, and let us trust that we DO NOT have to go this alone, we do together what we cannot do alone, after all, as my Dad would say “you’ll not get far runnin on empty.”