

SERVE A STRANGER

PASTOR CHARLIE BERTHOUD

1 KINGS 17:8-16

LOVE
God
Neighbor
Enemy

Sunday, March 1, 2026

“Serve a Stranger” | 1 Kings 17:8-16 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

For some people this is the season of hoping they can put away the snow shovels.

For some people this is the season of Spring Training.

For some people this is Girl Scout Cookie season.

I say YES to all of those, and for us as Christians this is the season of Lent.

Starting on Ash Wednesday and running through Easter Sunday, Lent is a time for us Christians to humble ourselves, to take time to look at our lives, and to prayerfully ask God to help us get back on track.

It's a time to recommit to following the teachings and life of Jesus.

This year our Lenten theme is about the core of our faith: Loving God, Neighbor and Enemy. And we can pray with Psalm 51, “create in me a clean heart, O God.”

Last week to begin the series, we had two of the best-known verses in the Bible

- Love God and neighbor, which Jesus called the greatest commandment
- Love your enemy, one of the more challenging teachings of Jesus

Today, our LGNE curriculum gives us a much less well-known narrative from long before the life of Jesus, back in the time of monarchy, and the theme for today is “Serve a Stranger.”

Our reading is set in the ninth century before Jesus, in the reign of Ahab, one of the many kings of Israel and Judah.

Ahab was one of the worst of the kings of Israel—and there were plenty of bad ones. Ahab made alliances with Israel's enemies and Ahab worshipped his money and power and a foreign god, named Baal, instead of the God of Israel.

Elijah is introduced in 1 Kings 17 as a prophet to challenge the corruption of Ahab.

Elijah bravely denounces the evil ways of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, calling out the corrupt king for idolatry and greed.

Early in 1 Kings 17, just before our reading for today, Elijah says there will be a drought because of the sin of Ahab. Elijah then goes into the wilderness at the



direction of God, to a place with a stream and where ravens come and bring him food. (Art by Giovanni Girolamo Savoldo. Wikimedia Commons.)

When the stream dried up, God sends Elijah to Zarephath, a foreign town, to a desperate widow who is near death, suffering because of the climate issues.

Listen for God's word from 1 Kings:

⁸Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, ⁹“Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there, for I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” ¹⁰So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, “Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink.” ¹¹As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, “Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand.” ¹²But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die.” ¹³Elijah said to her, “Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said, but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.” ¹⁴For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth.” ¹⁵She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶The 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.



Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

(Art by Giovanni Lanfranco (1582 - 1647) Wikimedia Commons)

Perhaps you can see now why our curriculum focus for this week is Serve a Stranger.

In this reading, we see these two strangers, a prophet resisting the power of empire and fleeing from the king, along with a widow on the edge of starvation, brought together, and they take care of each other.

While they could have ended up fighting for the drips of water and morsels of food, Elijah tells her to not be afraid, knowing that somehow God would provide. And God did provide.

How fascinating, that God unites two very different people who are both struggling with impact of climate in the form of a drought, and the impact of a greedy, selfish, idolatrous king.

If we keep reading, we see that the widow's son dies. But Elijah brings him back to life.

Elijah is portrayed as a forerunner of Jesus: he provides miraculous feeding, he brings someone back from the dead, he challenges the power of the king.

Elisha is an important figure in our tradition, and he shows up in the New Testament several times.

You may recall that on the mountain of the transfiguration, it was Moses and Elijah who briefly appeared with Jesus.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. ²And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became bright as light. ³Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

And you may recall that Jesus faced opposition and was almost killed in the beginning of his ministry, in Luke 4, when proclaimed that he came to bring good news to the poor, the blind, the oppressed—the “strangers” who had been forgotten and ignored. The crowd at the synagogue didn’t like that God’s blessing was going to all those “strange” people.

Jesus responded by essentially reminding the people that God’s love and blessing were not private property for the “insiders.” [from Luke 4:26-27]

There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months and there was a severe famine over all the land, yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon....

What I’m hearing from this scripture reading is that God cares about everyone, including and sometimes especially the stranger. So if we take this call to love our neighbors seriously, that might include strangers—people we don’t know well or at all.

Serving Strangers can happen in many ways.

I’m glad our church has an outdoor and indoor little food pantry, both of which get a lot of use.

And I’m glad that we have a Good Samaritan Fund, which helps pay for rent, utilities, and medical bills for people in need.

I’m glad that many of us have served strangers through mission trips, at soup kitchens and Habitat for Humanity workdays. I’m glad our church supports the staff and students at Stephens Elementary, most of whom began as strangers to us.



My hope is that these church ways of serving inspire us to serve in our daily lives.

We are called to serve, but it’s not a one-way street.

At the 11:00 service we're singing "The Servant Song" and the opening verse calls us to not only be servants but to be open to receiving service.

Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you?
Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too.

Sometimes we serve, and sometimes we can let other people serve us. There is a mutuality about service, a connectedness, a neighborliness about it.

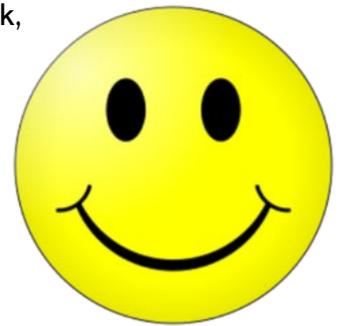
Desmond Tutu from South Africa understood this, sharing us understanding of the African term Ubuntu.

"Ubuntu says my humanity is bound up in yours; I am only because you are."

To close I want to suggest two possible opportunities for service this week, two opportunities to sincerely love your neighbor.

The first opportunity is pretty simple. Can you say "hello"? Let's practice. "Hello." Good job....!

Sometime this week, I guarantee you will have the opportunity to say hello to someone with a smile, even a stranger. And maybe that's as far as it goes.



The second opportunity is inspired by the song we'll sing at the end of worship, "For Everyone Born" which recognizes that there is room at the table for everyone.

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead...

I heard a story from a young adult a while ago who had a challenging childhood. Things were not good in their home with their parents, so this young person had many, many meals at a neighbor's house.

I'm not saying you have to invite total strangers into your home, but maybe you could invite someone you don't know to join you at

- The school cafeteria
- The coffee shop near work
- Bradfield Café

Friends the good news of the gospels is that in God's eyes, none of us are strangers. All of us are beloved children of God. Everyone has a place at the table.

May this table nourish us with enough love so that we can be a kind and gracious presence with whomever we meet this week. Amen.