

Elisha and the Widow's Oil
or How the Lord Fills Us with His Love

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, January 20th, 2013

“Then (Elisha) said, ‘Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors – empty vessels; do not gather just a few. And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour (the oil) into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones.’” (2 Kings 4:3-4)

A few years ago we touched on this story in an informal family service in the other room. Today we’re going to review it in more depth. (Apologies to those who were expecting a different topic but it just wasn’t going well....)

This story from 2nd Kings is a wonderful illustration of the relationship of love and wisdom, or how the Lord fills us with His love *according to the wisdom we acquire* by getting and using knowledge from His Word. It is particularly fitting that we think about this in the context of a child’s baptism, since the whole idea of baptism is to introduce a person to the knowledge and understanding that provide the “vessels” necessary to hold and share the goodness of love.

Let’s take the lesson a verse at a time (if you want to follow along in the text you’ll find it on page 424 of the pew Bibles). The first verse outlines the problem. “A certain woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, ‘Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord. And the creditor is coming to take my two sons to be his slaves.’” In other words, this woman was in debt, her husband was dead and so she had no means of earning a living, no income, and no money to pay her debts. The money-lender – obviously a cruel money-lender – was about to take her sons as slaves, not only devastating her emotionally but in all probability leaving her to beg for a living. It was a terribly sad situation.

But it is not only sad on the natural or external level, for we know that every aspect of this story is symbolic and represents internal, spiritual things within our own lives. This is where the real power of the story lies, and this is where we are so fortunate to have the teachings of the New Church to help us understand. In particular, the woman – a woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets – like all women in the Word represents affection, here the affection for the truth of the Word, represented by the sons of the prophets. But her husband, one of these sons, is dead. This is the truth itself that is or ought to be conjoined with love, but the fact that the man is dead shows that the truth is lacking. Here then is a situation that illustrates our own predicament when we have a love for the truth, but we don’t get it. In fact the truth we did know seems to have been taken from us and we are left feeling devastated – and rather desperate. We could think of a hundred illustrations of this plight, for example the college student whose faith is destroyed by a culture of materialism, especially by an atheistic professor, or the soldier or the victim of a crime or sickness or accident, who can’t understand why God permits such things.

The woman of course has two sons, who represent the truths of faith in the understanding, whatever understanding we may have left when the fundamental truth has been lost. But in the story these two sons are about to be lost as well, taken into slavery by a demanding creditor. So it is when we long for the essential truth in our lives but really realize that we do not have it, everything we know and believe is up for grabs, threatened to the point of despair over our spiritual

lives. We are in danger of becoming cynical, our faith taken from us to serve selfish, worldly considerations.

But in the story the woman cries out to Elisha. This represents our affection, our love crying out to the Lord. We feel desperate. This is not what we want. But we don't know what to do.

So in verse 2 Elisha says to her, "What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?" This is like the Lord Himself asking the blind man, "What do you want me to do for you?" to which he answered, "Lord, that I may see!" We want to know what is true, we want to know that the Lord cares. We want to know what to do about this miserable situation.

The house in the story (as in most stories of the Word) represents the human mind. So when the prophet asks the woman what she has in the house, in the spiritual sense it is the Lord, through His Word, asking each one of us what is in our minds. What is *on* our minds? What **DO** we know, and what **DO** we care about? What are we thinking? In other words, can we examine ourselves and reflect on anything good or useful or true that we may yet have in our thoughts or affections? Surely there is something good still there.

"And she said, 'Your maidservant has nothing in the house but a jar of oil.'" Now this is beautiful, for the jar of oil represents something good; *not much, but something*. In fact it is the knowledge, the memory, the mental or spiritual container in which the goodness of love as experienced so far in life is stored. Our teachings actually call this "the remnant" or "remains" because it is what remains in the interiors of our minds when all else seems lost. There's a whole wonderful set of teachings about this in this church, which we can study when we have time. Meanwhile note that the jar is a vessel, and it is other vessels that are mentioned next.

In verse 3 we have our text, our main thought for the day, where Elisha said, "Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors – empty vessels; do not gather just a few. And when you have come in, you shall shut the door behind you and your sons; then pour (the oil) into all those vessels, and set aside the full ones."

Now, remember that "vessels" are mentioned in many places throughout the Word. Of course, we're not talking ships here, but containers: jars, jugs, pots, pans, cups, bowls, wine skins or "bottles," oil lamps, any of the things that serve as containers for something else. As such they represent any external things that contain more essential things within - like the soul in the body, or the meaning in the story, the spiritual sense in the literal. If you recall the story of the 10 virgins who were waiting for the bridegroom in the Gospel of Matthew, you'll remember that 5 of them had plenty of oil in their lamps and were called "wise," but 5 did not have enough oil in their lamps and so were called "foolish." What did the lamps represent? And what the oil?

Well, simply put, because of its many, varied and wonderful uses, oil – in the Word most commonly olive oil – represents that goodness of love already mentioned. Think of it: such oil was used for food, for fuel, for healing, for lubrication; it was even used to preserve things like wine, as it could be poured over top of the wine to seal out the air and so prevent it from turning to vinegar. It had such a powerful representation that it was used for anointing priests and kings, not to mention all the holy things associated with worship in the tabernacle of Israel. Why did the "good Samaritan" pour oil and wine into the wounds of the poor man left for dead on the side

of the road in Luke, chapter 10? – because the oil is full of vitamins to promote healing, and the wine is a disinfectant! But more than this, the oil represents the goodness of love, and the wine the truth of faith. And you know, just as the Israelites in Bible times could not live without this precious liquid, and were considered wealthy if they had enough, so we today cannot live without the goodness of love, and we, too, are blessed if we have plenty.

But what about the vessels? Our doctrines tell us that these are all the many forms of knowledge that receive and hold this love, especially in this case the knowledge of what is good. To “borrow” in the Word is to learn, and “to lend” is to teach. Remember how the Children of Israel were told – not once but three times – before they left Egypt to return to the promised land to “borrow from the Egyptians *vessels of silver and vessels of gold*”? Egypt – the land of exquisite learning in the ancient near-east – represents a spiritual state of instruction for all who are there. But there comes a time when we must take the knowledge gained from instruction and enter into a new life. So the Israelites took these “vessels” from the Egyptians and followed the Lord.

Lamps also represent understanding, from which we get “light.” But there is no light without love, and so the understanding must be fuelled by the love that inspires us with a sense of meaning and purpose or we miss the whole point of living in this world.

Now look at what Elisha said to the desperate widow: “Go, borrow vessels from everywhere, from all your neighbors – empty vessels; do not gather just a few.” We can imagine her and her sons scouring the neighborhood collecting pots and pans and bottles and jugs, according to the prophet’s words. But what is the meaning for us? We can learn from every experience of life, but especially we can learn from our “neighbors,” who in the Word represent those who are good, or who have goodness in their hearts from the Lord. Which of those who saw the injured man by the side of the road was neighbor to him? – the “good Samaritan,” of course; he was called “neighbor” because he was the one who had compassion, who acted kindly toward him.

So when we are desperate, when we are in doubt about everything in our spiritual life, when we are in need and don’t know where to turn, what shall we do? “Borrow vessels.” Get more knowledge, get information, get the facts that will help us understand and receive the Lord’s love. Where? Everywhere, but especially from our “neighbors,” from those we love and respect, from those we know to be “good people” we can trust. And of course, remember that the Lord is the greatest “neighbor” of all, as His love and wisdom are beyond that of any human on earth. So above all we can go to His Word where we will certainly find knowledge that is open to and able to contain the influx of His love.

And we are told, “Do not gather just a few.” In other words, gather much knowledge, many different forms of knowledge, stories, facts, details, information – just like the details of *this story!* The point is that when we know and understand what the Lord is teaching us then we have a basis to receive His love and enjoy His blessing in our lives; otherwise, not understanding, we may think He doesn’t care, or doesn’t know what He’s doing, or maybe doesn’t even exist!

And the vessels must be “empty,” that is void of preconceived ideas, “open” to a positive spiritual interpretation – which is certainly the case with all the stories of the Word (no matter how dreadful they may seem in the literal sense). In other words, we must read the Word, and study and reflect on it with an open mind. And we must continue to do this as much as we can, gather-

ing, gathering until we can gather no more. For the wisdom of the Word is infinite: the more we learn the more we know how much there is to learn, and the more amazing and impressive it is. But at some point we need to rest and reflect, and *let the Lord's love flow into our knowledge*.

So the woman was told to go in, and shut the door behind her and her sons, and start pouring the oil from her one jar. And that is when the miracle occurred: the oil in the jar was replenished every time she poured, and she was able to fill every vessel that she and her sons had gathered.

What is it to “go in”? What did the Lord say when He taught His disciples to pray? – “But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father...” (Matthew 6:6). To go “in” is to reflect inwardly on spiritual things, to meditate on the knowledge that we have from the Word, to consider our motives and ask the Lord for help in overcoming the evils of our own nature as well as those of our worldly and self-centred culture that press upon us and “require” certain things of us. “Obey your thirst,” the ads used to say. You deserve the best! You have a right to every sexual obsession! The world owes you a living! **Not**. When we “go in” to a state of humble reflection, acknowledging our unworthiness and our dependence on the Lord, then (and only then) can the Lord answer our prayers, providing, powerfully providing all that we need to sustain our spiritual lives.

Finally, as we read in verse 6, when she had filled all the vessels, she told one of her sons to bring her another, but he said, “there is not another... So the oil ceased.” What flows in, we read, is according to the receiving vessel. Without wisdom love has no power. When knowledge fails, so does love, for then we don't know how to love and our affection, our longing, becomes mere sentimentality, merely natural, gullible, vulnerable, weak. So when we stop learning we stop growing, and the oil of genuine love from the Lord stops flowing.

Still, there is in this story enough to pay the debt and to sustain life: “Then,” we read, “she came and told the man of God. And he said, ‘Go, sell the oil and pay your debt; and you and your sons live on the rest.’” What a powerful conclusion to this amazing story! “Sell the oil:” share the love that God has given you; don't just keep it within, let others “own” it. Act on it, talk about it, “sell” it to all who will “buy into it.” “Freely you have received, freely give!” (Matthew 10:8). It's not true that selling something always involves a profit motive. We sell to earn a living; we buy to obtain the things we need. So we are involved in this commerce on a spiritual level every time we exchange our genuine affections and thoughts. The Lord also said, “Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). So we are commanded to help others gain from our experience of the Lord's love and truth.

What flows in is according to what flows out: what we get is according to what we give, and as contradictory as it seems, the more we give the more we will receive. If therefore we will do this, sharing the Lord's love according to the Word as we know and understand it, He will indeed give us life – spiritual life – in all abundance and confidence and blessing and peace.

Amen.

Lessons: Readings for an infant Baptism
 2 Kings 4:1-7
 Arcana Caelestia 2063:3