

Who Qualifies?

[Kings 17:8-24 Luke 7:11-17

June 6, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

1 Kings 17:8 - 24 *Then the word of the LORD came to him, ⁹ "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." ¹⁰ So he arose and went to Zarephath; and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." ¹¹ And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." ¹² And 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 cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple of sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." ¹³ And Elijah said to her, "Fear not; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For thus says the LORD the God of Israel, 'The jar of meal shall not be spent, and the cruse of oil shall not fail, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" ¹⁵ And she went and did as Elijah said; and she, and he, and her household ate for many days. ¹⁶ The jar of meal was not spent, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the LORD which he spoke by Elijah. ¹⁷ After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill; and his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. ¹⁸ And she said to Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" ¹⁹ And he said to her, "Give me your son." And he took him from her bosom, and carried him up into the upper chamber, where he lodged, and laid him upon his own bed. ²⁰ And he cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, hast thou brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son?" ²¹ Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried to the LORD, "O LORD my God, let this child's soul come into him again." ²² And the LORD hearkened to the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. ²³ And Elijah took the child, and brought him down from the upper chamber into the house, and delivered him to his mother; and Elijah said, "See, your son lives." ²⁴ And the woman said to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth."*

Luke 7:11-17 *Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only*

son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!" This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.

Who qualifies? If you think about it, that's one of the fundamental question around which human life is organized. Who qualifies to be a friend? Who qualifies for that job opening? Who qualifies as a subject of our care and concern, or – looking at it the other way 'round – who is disqualified to be one of us?

Who gets to decide the rules? Who gets to define the boundaries? Who gets to claim the tradition; who gets to decide who is inside and who is outside?

There's a lot of "qualification" talk going on in politics these days. Who qualifies as a true conservative – Rush Limbaugh? A Teabagger? Who qualifies as a liberal – the president or those who say he's too centrist?

How about asking who qualifies as a Christian? I've been told I'm not one because I haven't been "born again," I trust scientific accounts of evolution and genetic research, and I wasn't baptized by the proper method. Will the "real" Muslim please stand up, and will they be a Sunni or a Shia? A secular Turk, a member of the Taliban, or the new Miss USA?

Who's in, who's out; who makes the grade and who doesn't; who qualifies, who is outside the acceptable margins, who isn't welcome in the neighborhood? The passions around such question have fueled wars, shattered relationships, given birth to parties, provided momentum to movements, and written history in blood. More often than not religion has been at the center of such arguments, saying in one way or another, "God likes us best."

The people of Israel called themselves "God's chosen people." The king of Israel was the "anointed one," the one who embodied God's law and enforced it. Among the laws of God was that troublesome first one: You shall have no other gods before me. Ahab, king of Israel at the time, didn't take that very seriously. He had shrines erected about the

countryside devoted to fertility gods. And there was that other law having to do with not marrying outside the covenant. He didn't take that one too seriously, either, and married Jezebel, a pagan princess who thought those lovely pagan shrines did wonders for the Israel countryside.

Along comes Elijah, the prophet, who took such things seriously, indeed. He condemned Ahab and Jezebel and announced a curse of drought upon the land. In response the queen called out the storm troopers to rid themselves of the pesky prophet. Elijah takes it on the lam. He leaves Israel entirely, travels deeply into pagan territory in his escape, and finds safety and lodging with a widow and her son.

The details of the story are important. First, we have Elijah fingering the king for dereliction of duty and violation of law. Second, we have God directing Elijah to leave the chosen people and find rescue in a heathen enemy country. Third, the one who helps him is one without help herself; there would be no one more miserable, weak, impoverished, and without hope than a woman without a husband, brother, or son to care for her. Yet, Elijah is saved, the woman doesn't starve, and her son, who comes near death's door, is healed.

Now, leap ahead six hundred years. Jesus arrives in town just in time to see a funeral procession carrying a dead man out of the village. Chief among the mourners is a wailing woman – again, a widow whose only means of support is the man who has just died. She weeps for her lost son as well as her lost future. Jesus, without permission and without invitation, resuscitates the dead man and restores him to his mother.

Now, here's the question: what qualified these people for God's blessing? When Elijah asked the widow of Zarephath for some food, her response was that she only had enough meal and oil for a last meal with her son; a third mouth to feed meant only that all three would die a little sooner. But, the oil and meal do not run out, and the ill boy is healed. Was the woman and her son saved from starvation because they were especially good people? By ethnicity, language, behavior, and heritage they were pagans, non-Israelites; ipso facto they couldn't be considered "good." They were foreigners; they couldn't be part of the covenant. They were weak and powerless, female and child, and could be of no avail to the works of God, so it was supposed.

And regarding the widow at Nain and her son – what do

we make of that story? Jesus doesn't ask around to see if these were acceptable people. He doesn't interrogate the woman regarding her faith or belief. In fact he doesn't say a word, and apparently couldn't care less about such matters.

I wish I had a nickel for every time I've heard someone explain to me that in order to be saved all I have to do is believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, or all I have to do is express faith in him, or all I have to do is say this prayer or be baptized in this way or attend a Bible-believing church unlike all those other churches that read the Bible and talk about the Bible but don't really believe it....

Who qualifies? Many seem locked into that question's habits of separation and judgment as though anxious that someone might be getting into God's party without a ticket, so to speak... like the widow of Nain's son, who was brought back to life simply because Jesus felt compassion for him and his mother. There was no desperate request for help, no prerequisite profession of faith, no predetermination of the moral goodness of the dead man or his mother, and no test for doctrinal purity or appropriate party affiliation. Likewise in the story of Elijah, the widow, and her son, the mercy of God is free and indiscriminate and comes without precondition.

The essence of religion is the search for God. It is to connect with what is ultimately true and good. I would remind you that the word *religion* shares the same root as *ligament*. Re-ligion is all about re-ligamenting with God and, as these stories show, God re-ligamenting with us.

The stories in scripture reveals a loving God who has crafted the world in grace and imbued it with Spirit. Such a God cannot be reduced to some sort of narrow, authoritarian idol, nor can the Good News be used to build privilege and blessing for some in order to withhold mercy from others. The prophets and Jesus preached righteousness over self-righteousness, justice abounding over punishment, community over disintegration and division.

At a conference earlier this year, I heard the famed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann observe that there is much in the church that needs to be unlearned. The misreading and misapplication of scripture, preserved theologies once important for an ancient time but no longer applicable for our own, lingering attitudes and prejudices providing distorted images of one other...there is much to be unlearned. Indeed,

until we unlearn some of the discouraging doctrines and harmful hermeneutics of our faith, we will be incapable of fully growing toward God who, I believe, cares little for our intricate divisions and cares greatly that grace abound in the church and in the world.

Faith has classically been termed a leap, but too many of us want to take that leap at the narrowest point of the chasm. We're terrified of falling and of appearing unconventional and out of the mainstream. We should fear far more the possibility that instead of finding faith we will have only found assent to someone else's belief. Instead of a faith that searches and strengthens, we will have settled for a belief system in which all questions are settled and the search for new answers is not tolerated.

Faith is the search for God where we live and breathe and ache. Our faith is sought there in the midst of our sobs and in our laughter, there in our words when we take a stand, there in our work when we make a choice, there in our checkbook where we add up our priorities. My friends, let us leap where the arena is broad and spacious, for those are precisely the dimensions of the grace, mercy, and character of God whose compassionate love counts us as qualified to receive it.