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Proper 27B
Peace, Seattle
November 11, 2012
1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

She had every right to say NO. For one thing, she'd never seen him before.
Two, he wasn't from around there—his accent gave that away.
Three, she was alone.
And four, the little that he wanted was more than she could give him.

Zaira had every right to say NO. But she didn't.

During the last three years, whatever could go wrong in a person's life had gone wrong for Zaira.
It started with her husband's accident at work.

The truck he was driving blew a tire and ended up upside down in the ditch, leaving him severely injured. After a week in the hospital he died. Company insurance covered half of the bills, but that still left $20,000 worth, plus the funeral expenses.

As an only child, with both parents gone, Zaira didn't have any family to speak of.
Her husband had left his family in Texas years before, under less than positive circumstances.
So it was just the two of them now, Zaira and her 4-year-old son, Paolo.

Somehow she managed to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table during the first year after her husband's death. But then everything started to unravel.
She fell into a deep depression, lost her job, and was barely able to care for her son.

They lost their apartment in town, and their pick-up was repossessed, and now she and Paulo were living outside of town, in a rundown mobile home with no heat, save a woodstove, and no running water.

Zaira had swallowed her pride (what pride she still had) and applied for food stamps.
But on the way back from the grocery store the first of the month, her purse was stolen when she stopped for gas and had to take Paolo to the restroom.

There it was, the first of the month, and she had groceries for only half of it, with nothing to fall back on.

So, you see, when the stranger knocked on her door three weeks later, looking for a hand out, she had every right to say NO.

The man she saw through the screen seemed friendly enough, but then most of them did, at first.
His clothes fairly hung on his wiry frame. A scar running along the jaw line from his ear to his chin told a story—though it wasn't apparent just what that story was.

He did look like he could use a meal. But all that stood between her, her boy, and hunger was a half-empty box of Bisquick. She'd been mixing up pancake batter right then when the dog started barking and, moments later, she heard the knock at the door.

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He asked for water, and after sizing him up, she pointed to the pump across from her trailer.
He thanked her. She thought that was the end of it, and had gone to take the stack of cakes off the griddle when he knocked a second time.

I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU COULD SPARE A BIT OF BREAD, he asked her through the screen door.

"Mister," Zaira said, "the pancakes I just took off the stove are the last bit of food we've got in this house. I have no idea where dinner is going to come from and I've got a little boy in here to feed."

She was about to close the door, when his hand went up.

MA'AM, he said. I CAN SEE I HAVEN'T CAUGHT YOU AT THE BEST OF TIMES.
BUT WHAT IF I WAS TO TELL YOU THAT YOU NEEDN'T WORRY ABOUT TONIGHT'S SUPPER?
MIGHT YOU BE WILLING TO PART WITH ONE OF THOSE CAKES THEN?

She could have simply shaken her head and shut the door. But there was something of hope and conviction in his voice. And instead of closing the door she said,
ALRIGHT. ALRIGHT, I'LL GET YOU A PLATE.

She put two cakes on a paper plate, drizzled them with syrup, and gave them to the man.
And he received them like treasure, nodding with gratitude. Finding a place across the gravel drive, he sat down to eat.

Young Paolo, curious about this stranger he didn't know, looked out the window at the man, who had bowed his head in his hands, composing himself as if for prayer.

Later that afternoon, a car pulled into the driveway. It was Stacy, a woman Zaira knew from work.

YOU'VE BEEN ON MY MIND ALL WEEK, she told Zaira. I DON'T KNOW WHY. BUT I THOUGHT I'D DROP BY TO SAY HELLO. I BROUGHT SOME GROCERIES—I HOPE YOU DON'T MIND.

After Stacy's visit, as Zaira prepared dinner, the words the man had spoken to her kept turning over in her mind. She fixed up a plate for him in case he happened to show up—which he did.

And when she told him about her friend Stacy and the groceries, he simply smiled and nodded, receiving the plate of food once more as if it were treasure—and truly it was.

From the table, Paulo and Zaira watched the man as he went to his spot across the drive, sat down, and once again folded his hands in prayer.

MOMMA. Paulo asked, WHAT'S HE DOING?
HE'S PRAYING, she said. SAYING THANK YOU…TO GOD.

Paulo's brown eyes lit up. MAYBE WE SHOULD THANK GOD, TOO.

Zaira looked at her son and smiled. YES, PAULO…YES.

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In our Bible stories today we come face to face with two women who find themselves in poverty but who, nonetheless, are able to respond to the invitation of God to share something of themselves.

They have every right to say NO. But their response, instead, is to trust God with the outcome.

These are challenging stories for us who have so much.

Each week as we gather to hear stories like these, to eat & drink the Lord's Supper, and to share our lives, Jesus invites us to consider: HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

In these challenging times, when focusing care on ourselves seems the truly prudent thing to do, God comes into our space with a challenge to trust him first, and to live and give generously.

When we live with that spirit, when we practice that kind of generosity, God's love flows through us, and the world becomes a different place.

Let us pray:
God of abundance, when love and food seem scarce; when we feel dried up, parched, incapable of giving, you come into our midst and offer your self without reservation. Open our eyes to your presence; open our hands to one another.

God of peace, when war seems a foregone conclusion and violence inevitable, you come speaking PEACE and invite us to pray for enemies with the same fervor for which we pray for our own needs. Open our hearts to your presence in those we know as adversaries.

God of justice, when systems conspire to enshrine the wealthy at the expense of the poor, loosen our tongues to speak, so that none are forgotten, and justice is served.

In all things, Great Giver, conform our lives to that of him who, in emptying himself, brought abundant life for our world, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.