



June 10, 2007

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

1Kings 17:8-16

Mark 12:38-44

“Watch Out, God Turns the Tables”

When my children were small they participated in various preschool experiences, as has my young grandson. I’ve been particularly impressed by the Montessori materials that help children explore their world. Children are given the opportunity to organize and sort things—to bring order out of chaos. Circular pegs go into circular holes; square pegs go into square holes. There is one activity where colored chips are placed in order, from the darkest shade to the lightest.

At times I actually wish I could be four years old all over again. I am one of those people who like to create patters out of disorder, organization out of chaos.

This can be a good trait, but it can be a fault, too. Life, and the Bible are teaching me this.

Think about how complicated life is—how complex and confusing it has been so far, and probably will be in the future. All that complexity makes us uncomfortable—so we look for patterns; we seek order. One way in which we do this, unfortunately, is to IMPOSE patters that aren’t really there, to make assumptions that may or may not be true, in order to feel less threatened by the unpredictability of life.

We categorize. We categorize PEOPLE, for example, and we do it a lot.

People come in many categories. Let’s consider some of them.

What about “foreigners”? Now, THERE’s a category. What are “foreigners” like? Well, depending on their background, they can be “cute”—sort of like puppies; they can be “stupid”--- in which case they are the focus of numerous jokes; they can be “dirty”--- maybe just because their skin is darker than mine; they can be “exotic”--- a bit like beautiful leopards in the zoo; they can be “threatening”, “dangerous”, “trash”. But in all cases, they aren’t really like ME. They are DIFFERENT--- and in need of “help”, “teaching”, “improvement”, “defensive action”.

Another category is the “downtrodden”. This is a large group, but once again, it doesn’t include US. It can include widows and orphans—two categories mentioned in the Bible. But today we aren’t so inclined to use those words for this category. We think of the “poor”, the “hungry” the abused, the untreated mentally ill, the homeless, the chemically dependent. How do we understand these people? Again, they are usually viewed as people we might “help”, or as people we might need to defend ourselves against.

There are categories of people we view with respect or envy: the powerful. These may be people with education we do not have—degrees and titles; or people who have won elections. We think of people who have artistic talent, or who are famous, or possess immense wealth. We may admire these folks, and seek to emulate them in whatever ways we can.

In our categorizing of people we, often unconsciously, decide who among them might be good for us, and who would be bad for us. We decide who might be able to help us, and who might need our help. We decide who might teach us, and who we might need to teach. We decide who might lead us to grow, and who we might lead to grow. We decide who might draw us closer to God, who might have profound insights to provide, and who definitely does not and can not.

What does the Bible and life teach about all this? Well, I think they show us how God is acting in the midst of it ALL. AND they teach us our categories have nothing to do with reality; nothing to do with the way God works.

Let’s reflect on the Old Testament lesson for today. This reading presents one episode in the life of the prophet Elijah, who lived in the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Ahab about 850 B.C. Elijah confronted the king with his faithlessness, and foretold a great drought, which promptly came to pass.

Elijah himself is caught in the result of this drought—himself in need of food, which is more and more scarce, due to the lack of rain.

Who else appears in this story? Well, there's a widow. She stands in contrast to the royal family of the kingdom. She has nothing—she is poor; she is starving. She is a foreigner--- residing outside the boundaries of Elijah's own people. She has a son who depends on her for his existence, so she is doubly destitute.

Now, if we were in charge, what would we suggest as the next event in this story? The widow is in our category of the "powerless"- and in need of life-saving help. The prophet is God's own spokesman- he has the power, wisdom and might of God available to him. So—we'd likely have the prophet help the widow—showing the love and compassion of the Hebrew's Yahweh/God extend even to her.

Well, watch out! This is the BIBLE. And that's not how the story goes. God knows the widow is poor, a foreigner who would feel no obligation to help Elijah, destitute to the point of starvation, for herself AND her son. So God says, "Elijah, I want to send you to this woman. She will take care of you. She will feed you, hungry as you are in the midst of this drought."

She does. She feeds him, figuring, I guess, that death for three after their last meal is not much different than death for two. In the midst of her trouble, her pain, her weakness, she is a surprising source of power, strength and life. God acts through her actions and brings life from what looked to human eyes like certain death.

The Bible shows us this pattern again and again. God turns the tables. God does the opposite of what seems reasonable to us. God acts through the most improbable people in the most unlikely ways.

If you look for this, you'll find it. Read along through the Bible. You'll come to someone with a speech impediment. Watch out! This will be a great spokesperson for God. You'll come to a woman who cannot conceive a child, who is disgraced in her culture as a "barren" woman. Watch out! This will be the mother of a great leader. You'll come to an unwed pregnant peasant girl. Watch out! This will be the mother of God himself.

God turns the tables. Again and again, God turns the tables. God loves the poor, the downtrodden, the blind, lame and sick. The Lord sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, and lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord watches over the alien foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow.

God cares about suffering and opposes oppression. What do we do with this message in the church? We try to help those suffering souls who need our help. **BUT WE DON'T EASILY LET GOD BREAK INTO OUR CATEGORIES.** The poor, suffering of the world need US—we who are stronger and wiser to help

them. That's what our categories suggest. But God says, "Yes, indeed, they do need your help----- but watch out! I'm sending THEM to help YOU, too."

Think about the Gospel lesson. Who do we have in this story? Jesus, the crowd, the disciples, important people: teachers of the law, the rich. We also have, once again, a poor widow. Does this story show the fine, upstanding teachers and wealthy citizens helping out that poor, suffering widow? Nope. Watch out! Jesus says it plainly. In this story the teachers and the rich are in need of help. They need what the poor widow has. They need it bad. She has the wild, to us, pretty crazy impulsive ability to throw her very survival into the offering box.

All the characters in this story mill around. They occupy the same space, the same time, the same country and culture, the same expectations, the same religious traditions. And of all the characters, Jesus points to the least significant (in our eyes) and says, "SEE! She's incredible! She's the most significant example I can find to teach you. WOW! Learn from her." And, as we read the story carefully, it's clear: JESUS IS THE ONLY ONE WHO EVEN NOTICED HER.

This passage is often used as the text for fall fund-raising sermons in the church. But this story is not that simple. It's not just about fiscal stewardship, though it provides plenty of food for thought as we consider how we handle money.

But this story says more. It says, "Watch out! Your assumptions, your categories are not the same as GOD'S. Watch out! Let God show you what is important, and who is important. Let God teach you through folks you thought you'd need to teach. Let God help you through those folks who thought you'd need to help.

God has surprises in store, surprises galore! Watch out- God keeps turning the tables, but don't be afraid. God's ways are GOOD. Better than ours. Watch out! And rejoice. Amen.