

Last Tuesday was April Fool's Day. Believe it or not, I didn't play a joke on anyone. I know that may be hard for some of you to believe, but it's true, I refrained from making a fool of myself on April Fool's Day. I read an article that ranked the top ten April Fools' jokes of all-time. I don't know which group votes on these kinds of things but it was interesting reading nonetheless. Listen to some of these hoaxes.

In April of 1957 the BBC TV news show "Panorama" announced that a mild winter had led to a bumper spaghetti crop. The report showed footage of Swiss workers pulling strands of spaghetti from trees. Huge numbers of viewers called the BBC wanting to know how they could grow their own spaghetti tree. The BBC replied, "Place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best."

In April of 1998, Burger King published a full-page ad in USA Today that introduced a new menu item: a left-handed Whopper, designed for the 32 million left-handed Americans. According to the ad, the new Whopper had the same ingredients as the old Whopper, but all the condiments were rotated 180 degrees for the benefit of their left-handed customers. Thousands of customers went to Burger Kings all across the country requesting the new, left-handed Whopper. Many others requested their own right-handed Whopper!

This one is my favorite. In 1996 the Taco Bell Corp. announced it had bought the Liberty Bell and had renamed it the Taco Bell Liberty Bell. Hundreds of angry citizens called Philadelphia's National Historic Park to complain. White House press secretary, Mike McCurry, was asked about the Liberty Bell and responded by saying that the Lincoln Memorial had been sold as well. McCurry said it would be known as the Ford Lincoln Mercury Memorial!

Elijah didn't have any stories about left-handed Whoppers or the Liberty Bell or spaghetti growing on trees but he might as well have because what he had to say to King Ahab was just as shocking and unbelievable. This is our first encounter with the prophet Elijah. He just shows up on the scene out of nowhere. Elijah had something to say on behalf of God to King Ahab. Ahab was king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab was not a good king when it came to following God's ways. He formed a political alliance with the country of Sidon by marrying Jezebel, the king's daughter. The Sidon's worshiped the rain god Baal and Jezebel, in particular, had a deep faith in Baal. Israel flourished economically during the reign of Ahab

April 6, 2008

and there is evidence of expansion and growth. However, that expansion came with a price. Ahab had essentially kicked out Yahweh as the God of Israel in favor of Jezebel's God Baal.

Ironically enough, Elijah's name means "My God is Yahweh". How appropriate was it for a guy named "My God is Yahweh" to call down King Ahab for worshiping Baal. Elijah went to Ahab and said, "As the Lord the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." Can you imagine the reaction of Ahab? Like most evil rulers, Ahab probably surrounded himself with a bunch of "yes" people, so this sudden statement of doom and gloom from Elijah was not well-received. Remember that Ahab's wife Jezebel worshiped Baal, the rain god, so Elijah's prediction of a drought was not just a meteorological statement, but a religious statement. Elijah was basically saying, "Your god Baal is worthless."

God knew that Elijah needed to get out of Ahab's presence, but more importantly, that Elijah needed food and water during the drought. So God directed Elijah to go and hide east of the Jordan River. The most amazing thing happened when Elijah went into hiding. The ravens brought him his food! That's right – God directed the ravens to deliver Elijah bread and meat in the morning and evening to keep him alive.

On Wednesday we had our Disciple II Bible Study class and during the class Elizabeth Withrow noticed a redbird outside the window. Leave it to Elizabeth to notice the redbird! Anyway, the class stopped for a moment as we all watched the redbird in the courtyard. It was a beautiful bird. For whatever reason, we were all captivated by this bird. It was a reminder to us all that we are connected not only to one another but to all of God's creatures in one way or another. Elijah could certainly testify to that fact after his experience with the ravens.

Everything was working fine for Elijah and the ravens, but then the creek dried up and there was no water. So God directed Elijah to move on to Zarephath in Sidon. Interestingly enough, Zarephath was a hotbed for the worship of Baal. It was there in Zarephath that God directed a widow to feed Elijah. I believe if I was in Elijah's shoes, at that point in the adventure I would have had a few questions and complaints for God, but not Elijah. Elijah obediently followed God's instructions, even though they were out there in left field. It's easy to be obedient to God when things make sense and are going well, but it's much more difficult to be obedient when things don't make sense and are not going well.

April 6, 2008

In writing about this story, Eugene Peterson wrote,

“But Elijah is not a man to calculate his chances. He knows how to obey orders, even when the orders make no sense (maybe especially when the orders make no sense). He goes where God directs him and finds himself cared for not by ravens this time but by an even more unlikely hand of providence, a starving widow. She gives him her last meal, a meal that she is getting ready to cook and eat with her son after which the two of them will die together. That is the plan. But it doesn’t turn out according to plan. The hospitality the widow shows Elijah is transfigured into the hospitality that Elijah shows the widow and son. Giving begets giving. The little becomes much.”

This is really a remarkable story. Just imagine being offered a meal by a widow who is literally preparing the last meal for herself and her son. All the woman had to offer was a handful of meal in a jar and a little oil in a jug. No ribeye steaks. No fried shrimp. No lobster. Not even a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. What would it have been like to have been offered a meal from someone who was dying? I don’t know if you have ever been extended hospitality from someone who is in far worse shape than yourself, but I can tell you it is a powerful experience.

A few years ago I went to supper with a friend of mine. He lived in Corsicana and didn’t have much. In fact, he was really struggling. He had been laid off from his job and was struggling to make ends meet. When the check arrived at the table he picked it up and said, “This one is on me.” I said, “No it’s not!” He said, “Yes, I’m going to buy you supper.” I replied, “But you can’t afford that right now.” To which he replied, “I cannot afford not to.” It was his way of saying that even though he might not have enough to pay his light bill for the month; he could not survive without being generous and giving.

I would love to meet this widow when I get to heaven because I cannot think of a more hospitable thing to do than to offer a stranger you and your son’s last meal. She offered Elijah what she had but in reality, she was really offering God all that she had by offering it to Elijah. Elijah said, “For 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.” Keep in mind that there was just enough meal and oil for one last small meal, but with a little faith and obedience God made it last for days and days until the drought ended.

April 6, 2008

I believe that when we offer what we have to God, even if it doesn't seem like much, God has a way of blessing it and multiplying it. The point is we should be obedient and offer our best for God.

The story is told that one day a beggar by the roadside asked for alms from Alexander the Great as he passed by. The man was poor and wretched and had no claim upon the ruler, no right even to lift a solicitous hand. Yet the Emperor threw him several gold coins. A courtier was astonished at his generosity and commented, "Sir, copper coins would adequately meet a beggar's need. Why give him gold?" Alexander responded in royal fashion, "Copper coins would suit the beggar's need, but gold coins suit Alexander's giving." We should always give our best because there is certainly enough to go around.

In the book "Learning to Trust" Bernie May talked about the story of Eunice Pike and the Mazatec Indians in south-western Mexico. For the past forty years Eunice Pike has worked with the Mazatec Indians. During this time she has discovered some interesting things about these beautiful people. For instance, the people seldom wish someone well. Not only that, they are hesitant to teach one another or to share the gospel with each other. If asked, "Who taught you to bake bread?" the village baker answers, "I just know," meaning he has acquired the knowledge without anyone's help. Eunice says this odd behavior stems from the Indian's concept of "limited good." They believe there is only so much good, so much knowledge, so much love to go around. To teach another means you might drain yourself of knowledge. To love a second child means you have to love the first child less. To wish someone well--"Have a good day"--means you have just given away some of your own happiness, which cannot be reacquired.

How often do we do the same? We say to ourselves, "I just don't have anything left. I'm too tired. There is not enough of me to go around." If I had a dollar for every time I have said those things I'd be a wealthy man! But the reality is that even though it doesn't seem like it at times, there is always enough to go around when it is offered in a spirit of generosity and love. When we come to this table to share in the body and blood of Christ it doesn't seem like we are receiving much. It's just a small piece of bread and drop of juice, but what a great reminder that the host of this table specializes in taking the small, seemingly insignificant things of life, including you and me, and making something of them. One of my favorite songs in our hymnal is "Something Beautiful". Listen to the words – "Something beautiful, something good; all my confusion he understood; all I had to offer him was brokenness and strife, but he made something beautiful of my life." The table is set and ready. Come and bring all you have to the Lord. Amen.