

Using What You've Got
2 Kings 2:4-7
(Elisha¹ suggests a creative solution to a widow's plight.)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church
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How many of you browse through the book of 2 Kings for inspiration?! Well, I sure don't. Yet, here is a little story tucked away in this book which is precious and filled with wisdom. I love this story.

Elisha was a prophet and leader of the people of Israel—I'll tell you more about him in a minute. There had been a horrible battle between the Israelites and the Moabites. (If "Moabite" happens to ring a bell for you, it's probably because the rather well-known Ruth in the Hebrew Bible was a Moabite.) Many men had died in that battle, including the husband of the widow in this vignette we just heard. This woman, the widow, grieved the loss of her husband *and* was also left with much debt and two sons. It was the law at the time that the people to whom the family owed money could seize her children and sell them as slaves to retrieve some of their money. You can imagine that this mother was utterly panicked and angry. She was especially angry at the leader Elisha, for her husband had been called *into* war by him and killed serving in *his* army.

She cries to Elisha, the leader, explaining her situation. Elisha, to his credit, listens to her. (He must have heard Karen's sermon last Sunday on the importance of listening.) We are told he responded, "What shall I do for you?"

Wow--He's going to help her out! We don't know what she recommends, but in the meantime, this caring leader has an idea. He asks her what she has in her house. The woman responds that all she has is a **jar of oil**. [Go over to jar on table.] Elisha makes a suggestion. "Go outside, borrow vessels of all your neighbors, empty vessels, and not too few." He suggests that she fill these empty vessels that are gathered with the oil that she has. [Karen goes to table and Jace and Craigo stand up.] Karen will represent the widow and Jace and Craigo will be her children. They go around the neighborhood to find people willing to give them empty jars. Does anyone have an empty jar? [About 24 people in the congregation will hold a jar up (that I've given them before worship.) Jace and Craigo gather as many as they can at a time and bring them to the table, then go get more. Karen meanwhile takes the filled olive oil jar and pretends to pour into all the jars as they arrive. When all the jars are brought up, Jace and Craigo sit down; when Karen finishes pretending with the last jar, she sits down.]

Many, many filled jars later, the oil finally stops pouring out of her jar! The woman returned to Elisha who told her to sell the oil and pay the family debts, knowing that she could then live on the rest of the money. This miracle story entices me to try my olive oil bottle when I get home—to start pouring and see what happens!

This is a tiny story....a miracle story. Given that it is centuries old, who knows the exact events? We have a hard time remembering events in our own lives from two years ago! But, the situation it describes is enticing, isn't it?

I love this little story for what it says just by itself, alone.

However, of course the story sits in a bigger context, and we must pay *some* attention to that. If we look at the bigger context, the events that surround this story, we are reminded that *war is horrible*: it kills soldiers who are spouses, parents, and children. Whatever other political or religious consequences emerge from wars, people die. We continue to have wars, with various political and religious consequences, even though wars kill precious people. We are acutely aware of this as we are still at war in 2011. I'm sure we all meditate frequently upon *why and how* we humans continue to engage in war.

This little story reminds us, too, of the bigger context of wars. *There are so many "Causalities of War" beyond the soldiers killed.* In this biblical example, a family was about to become destitute. Though we would not condone the ancient laws of creditors taking children as slaves, we do still remind ourselves to provide tangible compassion as we support families of those who serve in the military.

Wars and casualties of war will continue until we are able to figure out how to love one another through difficulties and conflicts, how to love one another again and again, through new difficulties and new conflicts.

Aware that war is the backdrop of this little story of the soldier's widow, we'll proceed with this little vignette *within* the bigger story.

The woman who has only a jar of oil is advised to ask her children to collect many jars, then she discovers *as she pours* that her oil keeps flowing—enough to fill all the jars her children have brought.

We might say, "Elisha performed a miracle," or "This is a miracle story that *grew up* around Elisha."

Whichever of those is true, I'd like to consider the story a metaphor, an image for us, for it truly has evocative power for us today, this week, and this year!

The widow is advised to NOTICE what she DOES have and to USE what she has. When she does this, she discovers that what she HAS ends up being ENOUGH.

Let's think of various ways we could "use" this advice. Maybe we have one or two body parts that we sort of like—the rest are questionable, but—if we let the story guide us, we can use our appreciation of our few body parts, to help us to feel good about ourselves, to give thanks for our *whole* body.

Or, maybe we cannot move well on our feet. We can still do plenty of other things, so we "move" with our minds, our hearts, our voices, and our imagination. We don't move as fast on our feet, but we can nevertheless be creative and move in creative ways.

I depend upon parents with children at home to give me good sermon illustrations from *Parent Magazine*. I no longer look at that magazine, but I was inspired by a cover article in the *AARP* magazine.

The article was an interview with the actor Michael Caine. The interviewer asked him, "Do you have fatherly advice for your daughters?"

Caine said:

There's a motto I got from a producer in Repertory Theater. I was in rehearsals, waiting behind a door to come out while a couple on stage were having a row. (In American English, that's translated "argument.") They started throwing furniture, and a chair lodged in front of the door. My cue came and I could only get halfway in. I stopped and said, "I can't get in. The chair's in the way." And the producer said, "**Use the difficulty.**" I said, "What do you mean?" And he

said, “Well, if it’s a drama, pick it up and smash it. If it’s a comedy, fall over it.” This idea stuck in my mind, and I taught it to my children—**that the situation in life that’s negative, there is something positive you can do with it.** “Use the difficulty”—it’s like a motto in our family.

Use the difficulty.

One jar of oil—and borrowed empty jars. **Use the difficulty.**

A chair is in the way—fall over it to make people laugh or crash it with dramatic flare. **Use the difficulty.**

Ray Charles “saw” with his ears. **He used the difficulty.**

One of my favorite assignments for seminary students was to ask them to read a chapter in a book written for social workers. The entire book was about “Mastering Resistance”—resistance people had to cooperating with counselors. That one chapter listed perhaps 30 different kinds of resistances people may have to cooperating with a counselor. For example: “You are too young to be able to help me.” Or, “You’re too old to remember what it’s like to be 20.” Or, “You’re single, how would *you* know what it’s like to be married?” Or, “You’re married, how can you grasp what it’s like to be single?”

The authors of this chapter give illustration after illustration about how to “Use the Resistance.” The *younger* counselor could respond, “I *am* very young, still wildly optimistic about counseling. However, *you* will need to teach me how to understand your situation.” The *older* counselor could say, “I am older. I have lots of experience, but just like everyone else I’ve counseled, you are completely unique, and I’m eager to get to know your world—however different that is from mine.”

Use what we’ve got.

It’s possible to read this story many times, over and over, and to think of it as a “pick yourselves up by your bootstraps” story. “Woman, use what you have.” She heeds the advice, and all is well.

For years I had loved this story, and that’s how I thought of it. I had grasped the idea that I needed to search within, to find something I could *use* to help myself with difficulties. I took the prophet’s advice as personal: *I surely have what it takes to get me through, if I’m resourceful.*

This week the story struck me with its much bigger message. This woman does NOT solve her difficulty alone, does she? Of course Elisha helps her, with his *idea* and with his miracle to keep the oil flowing. *But, look who else helps.* NEIGHBORS! They give her their jars! Maybe that isn’t *big* help, but it *is a big help when many neighbors give her jars.* Not only that, but some people in the community evidently *purchased* these jars of oil after they were filled.

It took a village to get her out of her difficulty, which was not her private difficulty to begin with, but one caused in the first place by the larger group of people, the people of Israel, going to war. **She had to use what she had; but others helped her.**

In our congregation, hundreds of meals, showers for homeless persons, backpacks, hygiene kits, and dollars have been delivered (and perhaps received) by you all this past year; thousands over the past decade. One meal doesn’t seem like much, but it all adds up! Our various gestures are like the neighbors giving their jars to this widow with oil. They are part of the miracle using what we’ve got, until lo-and-behold, it’s enough.

If *you* have a challenge or difficulty right now, let this little miracle story surround you with **hope**. Let's each of us discern what we **do** have. Then let us **use what we have**. And, in the using, let us **let others help us**, with what they freely and joyously want to share. Elisha's strategic plan surely can help us with **abundant creative solutions, together**.

¹ Prophet Elisha is found in I Kings 22:41 to II Kings 8:29