

Unsung Heroes of Faith

“The Widow of Zarephath”

[1 Kings 17:8-16](#)

One of the shows I like to watch on TV is America’s Got Talent. And apparently, I am not alone. Since its first episode aired in 2006, the program has attracted around 10 million viewers per season on average, and it now has spread to 183 countries around the globe. For the last 13 years, America’s Got Talent has produced a number of new celebrities, as a variety of talented people from across the United States and abroad have competed on the national stage, singing, dancing, and performing magic, comedy, stunts, and other special acts. Here are some of the names of those who have become very successful and famous through this popular show:

- Terry Factor, the singer, comedian, and impressionist who now has his own show in Las Vegas;
- The Texas Tenors, the classical vocal group that has performed in over 1,500 concerts worldwide since 2009;
- Lindsey Stirling, the violinist and dancer who has recorded three studio albums and toured the world;
- Jackie Evanchoat who became the youngest solo platinum artist of all time, at age 10;
- Matt Franco, the magician who has performed magic shows in Las Vegas and on national TV;
- Michael Grimm, the singer who released many albums and now performs in Las Vegas;
- Darci Lynne Farmer, the singer and ventriloquist who won the competition at age 11 and has performed across the nation for sold-out audiences;
- Biana Ryan, the show’s first winner who was also only 11 years old at the time. She has released many music videos and singles in her teen years.

Perhaps, you’ve recognized some, if not all of these names. The participants of America’s Got Talent not only have great talent but also have great stories. And, what their stories have in common is their dedication to their talent, often in the face of unfortunate circumstances, and their determination to overcome the difficulties they encounter along the way.

Kodi Lee, a 22-year old southern California native, won the 14th competition this past September. When he was only 3 months old, he was diagnosed with a visual disorder that caused him to be categorized as legally blind. At age 4, he was diagnosed with autism. The conditions have affected his hormones and how he processes emotions. He cannot tell people when he is hurting or in danger. Early on, his parents discovered he was gifted in music and had him take music lessons. Now, Kodi can play more than 6 musical instruments and sing beautifully. On top of that, he is a gifted tap dancer.

Like Kodi’s story, many stories of the participants of America’s Got Talent are quite inspiring, and they are revealed to the world beyond the circle of their family and friends when the talented individuals take the stage and share their talent with others.

But, there are many other great stories that are not told on the stage that are not played out in front of a big, cheering crowd. They are stories of unsung heroes, people who do great deeds but receive little or no

recognition for their actions. Acts of the unsung heroes often go unnoticed because they serve and help quietly. They give more than they take. These anonymous men and women willingly sacrifice themselves for the good of others.

In the Bible, there are many stories of such unsung heroes, men and women we seldom hear about despite the crucial roles they played for God's saving work. And we will learn about some of those unsung heroes in the Bible this month. Today, we turn to the story of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:8-16 that Garrison beautifully read for us earlier.

Elijah was a prophet during the reign of king Ahab. Throughout the history of the Israelites, there were some good kings and bad kings. The list of not-so-good kings is longer than the other one, and unfortunately, Ahab is included in the bad king list. He had a foreign wife, Jezebel, who brought with her pagan practices. In the first part of chapter 17, we find Elijah hiding from the wrath of the king and the queen after he boldly criticized their sinful acts and predicted a prolonged drought. The next chapter indicates that the drought lasted for over 3 years!

During his exile, God provided for Elijah in unusual ways. For a while, ravens brought him food, bread and meat twice a day, in the morning and in the evening, and he was able to drink from a nearby brook. When the brook dried up, God sent the prophet to a widow in Zarephath. In the Old Testament world, widows were very poor and marginalized people. Usually, men provided financial and social protection to their women. So, without men, widows were powerless and vulnerable to abuse by powerful men. Yet, today's Bible story reveals to us that God's provision came to Elijah through a very unlikely person, a foreign widow.

When Elijah saw the woman at the gate and approached her, she was picking up a few sticks to make a small fire. Elijah asked her to give him water and food, and her response was heartbreaking. She was going to make a fire to cook food with only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug that she had. It would be the last meal for her and her son. What a heartbreaking situation! Yet, Elijah pushed her further and asked her to still first give him food. He told her that if she did so, if she trusted him, God would keep refilling her empty flour jar and oil jug until the drought was over.

So, what did she do? According to the NIV (New International Version), "She went away and did as Elijah had told her. So, there was food every day for Elijah, and for the woman and her family." Incredibly, she did what Elijah asked her to do. She chose to trust the stranger. She chose to believe God's promise.

It is important to note here that God did not give her food for a week, a month, or a year, but for a day -- just enough for her and her household. Similar to how the Israelites, during their time in the wilderness, had to trust God and gather up only their daily portion of manna, she had to trust God for her daily bread. Even in the impossible situation she was in, this Gentile, a foreigner, took a leap of faith and practiced generosity. And it was her trust in God's promise that made God's miracle possible. It was her generosity extended to Elijah, a stranger, that saved and sustained her and her family, as well.

This nameless foreigner was a true hero who saved and preserved the prophet Elijah during the prolonged drought. In his first sermon that is recorded in the gospel of Luke, Jesus used the story of this widow of Zarephath as an illustration of true hospitality and generosity (Luke 4:25-26). Later, as recorded in the gospels of Luke and Mark, Jesus pointed out the faith and generosity of another widow (Luke 21:1-4, Mark 12:41-44). The two copper coins she gave were very small, almost nothing in comparison to what the rich

people gave. But, Jesus said, "This poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Both the widow of Zarephath and the widow in Jerusalem, these two poor women, whose names we do not even know, model for us a life of faith, trust, and generosity.

These unsung heroes are among our church family. They give more than they take. They serve and help quietly. They give their money, their time, their labor, their heart without seeking to be rewarded in any way. Week after week, they show up here at the church and do their parts in various fields of ministry. They volunteer at schools, hospitals, nursing homes

Just to name a few, they are now in the Sunday School. They are here in the choir. Some make copies of the worship bulletin. Some stuff them with inserts. Some organize pew pockets. Some refill the altar candles with oil. Some members of the United Methodist Women were busy making food for their annual fundraiser last week. And, many of you bought their food to support their ministries. Many of those saints whose names we read today are also unsung heroes. Whenever a church member dies, in the process of celebrating the person's life, I discover many wonderful things he/she has done to serve and help - one who served as an usher for many years; one who taught in the Sunday School for many years...

The world still may not notice these unsung heroes. But, God does. Through the nameless widow of Zarephath, God brings about deliverance for the prophet Elijah who then God uses to save Israel from pagan worship. And, through the nameless widow at the Temple, Jesus tells his followers about true faith -- how we must place our full trust in God. So, let us sing together for these unsung heroes. Let us give thanks to God for the example of all the saints who go before us, who show us what it means to live by faith.