

2 Kings 4:8–37 (NIV)

⁸One day Elisha went to Shunem. And a well-to-do woman was there, who urged him to stay for a meal. So whenever he came by, he stopped there to eat. ⁹She said to her husband, “I know that this man who often comes our way is a holy man of God. ¹⁰Let’s make a small room on the roof and put in it a bed and a table, a chair and a lamp for him. Then he can stay there whenever he comes to us.”

¹¹One day when Elisha came, he went up to his room and lay down there. ¹²He said to his servant Gehazi, “Call the Shunammite.” So he called her, and she stood before him. ¹³Elisha said to him, “Tell her, ‘You have gone to all this trouble for us. Now what can be done for you? Can we speak on your behalf to the king or the commander of the army?’”

She replied, “I have a home among my own people.”

¹⁴“What can be done for her?” Elisha asked.

Gehazi said, “She has no son, and her husband is old.”

¹⁵Then Elisha said, “Call her.” So he called her, and she stood in the doorway. ¹⁶“About this time next year,” Elisha said, “you will hold a son in your arms.”

“No, my lord!” she objected. “Please, man of God, don’t mislead your servant!”

¹⁷But the woman became pregnant, and the next year about that same time she gave birth to a son, just as Elisha had told her.

¹⁸The child grew, and one day he went out to his father, who was with the reapers. ¹⁹He said to his father, “My head! My head!”

His father told a servant, “Carry him to his mother.” ²⁰After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died. ²¹She went up and laid him on the bed of the man of God, then shut the door and went out.

²²She called her husband and said, “Please send me one of the servants and a donkey so I can go to the man of God quickly and return.”

²³“Why go to him today?” he asked. “It’s not the New Moon or the Sabbath.”

“That’s all right,” she said.

²⁴She saddled the donkey and said to her servant, “Lead on; don’t slow down for me unless I tell you.” ²⁵So she set out and came to the man of God at Mount Carmel.

When he saw her in the distance, the man of God said to his servant Gehazi, “Look! There’s the Shunammite! ²⁶Run to meet her and ask her, ‘Are you all right? Is your husband all right? Is your child all right?’”

“Everything is all right,” she said.

²⁷When she reached the man of God at the mountain, she took hold of his feet. Gehazi came over to push her away, but the man of God said, “Leave her alone! She is in bitter distress, but the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me why.”

²⁸“Did I ask you for a son, my lord?” she said. “Didn’t I tell you, ‘Don’t raise my hopes?’”

²⁹Elisha said to Gehazi, “Tuck your cloak into your belt, take my staff in your hand and run. Don’t greet anyone you meet, and if anyone greets you, do not answer. Lay my staff on the boy’s face.”

³⁰But the child’s mother said, “As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So he got up and followed her.

³¹Gehazi went on ahead and laid the staff on the boy’s face, but there was no sound or response. So Gehazi went back to meet Elisha and told him, “The boy has not awakened.”

³²When Elisha reached the house, there was the boy lying dead on his couch. ³³He went in, shut the door on the two of them and prayed to the LORD. ³⁴Then he got on the bed and lay on the boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands. As he stretched himself out on him, the boy’s body grew warm. ³⁵Elisha turned away and walked back and forth in the room and then got on the bed and stretched out on him once more. The boy sneezed seven times and opened his eyes.

³⁶Elisha summoned Gehazi and said, “Call the Shunammite.” And he did. When she came, he said, “Take your son.” ³⁷She came in, fell at his feet and bowed to the ground. Then she took her son and went out.

To be radically hospitable is to offer the unexpected extra.

Today's story of radical hospitality is a good bit longer than most that I print in these studies, but I hope you've taken a few minutes to read and savor it all. As do all the stories of the prophet Elisha, this one is focused principally on God's life-giving power. It is a Lazarus story. And it all begins with a simple act of hospitality.

Elisha

When Elijah met God at Mt. Horeb after fleeing from the wrath of Jezebel, he heard God in "the sound of sheer silence." Among other things, God told Elijah to find a man named Elisha, whom Elijah was to anoint as his successor.

So Elijah left the mountain and sought out Elisha. Elijah found the young man plowing his field. As Elisha guided his oxen, Elijah tossed his own mantle (a shawl-like garment) over the younger man; Elisha had been called by God. Elisha would leave everything to follow after Elijah. He even slaughtered his ox and sold all his farm equipment. There was no going back. Elisha committed himself 100%.

After the departure of his mentor, in a fiery chariot no less, Elisha carried on the work of his mentor.

Elisha's ministry was a ministry of life. He restored life to a young boy who had died. He saved many lives by purifying a pot of poisonous stew. He fed a hundred men with a few scraps. But Elisha also followed in the political footsteps of his mentor. Elisha confronted the kings who turned away from the LORD. He played a key part in several Israelite victories. He was even instrumental in the overthrow of a king. Elisha never shirked away from the responsibilities given him by God and passed on to him by Elijah.

1. A mantle was a long piece of cloth, a bit like a shawl, that was worn over the shoulders. Elijah's mantle for him was like the staff that Moses carried.

One day, Elisha comes to Shunem, a town in the Jezreel Valley, southwest of the Sea of Galilee. One of the well-to-do townspeople, an unnamed woman, invites Elisha to her home for a meal. This is a kind gesture, but nothing special, nothing radical.

I suppose they hit it off, because she gives Elisha an open invitation to come to her home to eat whenever he is in Shunem. (Elisha is an itinerant prophet of God, going where the Spirit sends him). With this invitation, the woman goes beyond what would be expected.

But then, this Shunammite woman rockets way past what might be expected of her and heads into the outer limits of radical hospitality. Knowing that Elisha is a holy man of God, she prepares a room that will be there waiting for Elisha whenever he needs it. Basically, she takes him in as a no-charge boarder on a come-and-go basis. This is truly radical hospitality. And just look where it leads. There is no indication that the woman did any of this for some hope of reward, but that is still where her radical hospitality leads. Kindness creates kindness.

Elisha wants to do something for the woman who has been so kind and gracious to him. He offers to peddle his influence, which is considerable, but she has no need of it. By all appearances she is formidable in her own right.

But she is childless and that is a continual source of much sadness for her, as it was for all the women of her day who could have no children. The narrator leads us to think that it isn't that she is too old, but that her husband is old, uninterested, and ineffectual.

So, Elisha tells her that she will have a son . . . and she does. The life-giving power of God is on display yet again. That multiplication effect.

After some years, the boy falls deathly ill. The boy's father seems to be useless in this, as he is in all matters. But the woman (still unnamed!) heads off to find Elisha. When she does, she pleads for his help. Elisha sends his servant, Gehazi, ahead to lay Elisha's

staff across the boy's face until Elisha is able to get there. When Elisha gets there, the boy is dead, really truly dead.

After emptying the room, Elisha lays across the lifeless body and prays to God. Then, life is restored to the boy.¹ Indeed yes, the LORD God is the giver of life.

This is a well-told story in the book of Kings. The characters have flesh on their bones, particularly the Shunammite woman. In his commentary on the story, Richard Nelson shares some helpful observations on her:

In contrast [to her husband], she is a powerful and admirable character. She is a woman of substance (v. 8) capable of building and furnishing a substantial guest lodge. She knows how to take advantage of circumstances (v. 10). She is an independent woman unwilling to take favors, relying on kinfolk rather than powerful strangers (v. 13), not subject to unrealistic hopes (v. 16). She knows how to behave properly (vv. 15, 27, 37) and speak properly (v. 16) towards prophets. She knows the value of silence at the right moment (vv. 23, 26), but can make a convincing and impassioned appeal when the time is ripe (v. 28). She is engagingly maternal (v. 20), but in a crisis acts decisively. Revealing by her actions in verse 21 that her plan is already formed, she hastens straight to Elisha, refusing to talk to subordinates, refusing to be turned aside from what she has planned for the prophet, and in the end is proved right by circumstances. She is one of the Old Testament's most attractive characters.²

There is an epilogue to the story (2 Kings 8:1-6) The woman has followed Elisha's advice and moved away to avoid a famine. When she and her family return to Israel, she makes a trip to see the king. She wants her home and land restored to her. When she arrives, she finds Gehazi, the servant, regaling the king with stories of Elisha. Gehazi has just gotten to the point in the story when Elisha saves the dead boy and . . . in walks the woman! Needless to say, the king gave her all that she asked.

So much from one small act of hospitable kindness. Hospitality is like that. It seems so small in the big scheme of things. But it is not small at all, certainly not in the eyes of God. If you ever doubt that, remember the Shunammite woman and all that came of her radical hospitality, that unexpected extra she gave to Elisha.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

There are some excellent resources online on the topic of Christian hospitality. The following are some questions to ponder and pray about that were written by Jason Foster, Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia.

- 1) In what ways do I need to be more open in my extension of hospitality? In what ways do I need better boundaries?
- 2) Am I beyond being surprised in my faith walk? Do I really believe that God supernaturally shows up when 2 or 3 are gathered in his name (Mt 18.20)?
- 3) Do I play favorites in my extension of hospitality? If so, how am I rationalizing it? Is this a problem?
- 4) Do I think there is a link between hospitality and the transmission of the Gospel and care for the poor? What does that link look like in my life?

¹ The boy is not resurrected, which is to pass through death never to die again. The boy is resuscitated. Life is restored to him, but he will still grow old and die. His death has not been defeated but only forestalled. This is true of Lazarus too. Only Jesus has been resurrected, dying and then rising to a newly-embodied life which death can never touch.

² Nelson, R. D. (1987). *First and Second Kings*. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (172–173). Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.

The Church as House of Hospitality
from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

The New Testament abounds in references to hospitality. The record of Jesus' life as an itinerant teacher and miracle worker is a virtual chronicle of hospitality received (Mt 26:6; Mk 1:29; 7:24; 14:3; Lk 7:36; 14:1, 12; Jn 12:1-2). The most famous pictures of that hospitality are Mary and Martha's entertainment of Jesus (Lk 10:38-42) and the occasion when Jesus invited himself to the house of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10). In his Olivet Discourse, Jesus made hospitality to himself and to his missionary "brothers" the key to entering the kingdom of heaven in his statement, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35 NRSV). When Jesus dispatched his followers, he sent them out on the assumption that they would depend on hospitality as they traveled (Mt 10:9-14; Mk 6:7-10; Lk 9:1-4). Failure on the part of villagers to provide such hospitality was said by Jesus to seal their doom (Mt 10:14-15; Mk 6:11; Lk 9:5).

Similar pictures of hospitality pervade NT glimpses of life in the early church (Acts 2:46). Hospitality was key to the missionary endeavor of the early church, as evidenced by the way the ministries of Peter (Acts 10:6, 18, 32, 48) and Paul (Acts 16:15; 18:7; 21:4, 8, 16; 28:7) relied on a supply of hospitable contacts as they traveled on their missionary ventures. Corresponding to these pictures of hospitality are NT injunctions to practice it: "Extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom 12:13 NRSV); "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2 NRSV); "Be hospitable to one another without complaining" (1 Pet 4:9 NRSV). The qualifications for a bishop included the showing of hospitality (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8). The same qualification applied to widows who wished to be "put on the list" of Christian workers (1 Tim 5:10).

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Luke 9:1-9 Jesus sends out the Twelve, expecting them to be received hospitably. If they are not so welcomed, they are to move on.	Tuesday, Luke 10:38-42 Mary and Martha entertain Jesus.
Wednesday, 1 Timothy 3:1-14 Among many other things, leaders in the church are to be hospitable.	Thursday, 1 Timothy 5:9-10 It seems that hospitality is expected of all, even women who want on the list of widows to be cared for by the community.
Friday, 1 Peter 4:7-11 Peter reminds the believers of God's call to extend hospitality to one another and to do it without grumbling!	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.
This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.
On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John
Meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation
Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at
www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons."
You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon.

There is also an archive all the studies (more than 500+) at
www.scottengle.org