

Pentecost 24 (27B)  
Trinity Parish, Seattle  
November 8, 2015

I Kings:17:8-16; Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44

Widows. We hear about widows today – in both our reading from 1st Kings and in the Gospel of Mark. They are two tales of scarcity and abundance.

We don't often (but maybe we should) talk about widows (and widowers) as a group these days. Those who have lost a spouse certainly have unique issues to deal with in their grief, and in the re-structuring of their lives and their finances and their relationships following the death of their partners. Many of the issues they deal with would be the same, perhaps – but many would be different from the issues faced by widows in biblical times. We see pictures of some of those differences in our two stories today.

We have a houseguest with us from Rwanda, Fr. Philbert Kalisa, whom some of you will remember from his prior visit. (He's preaching elsewhere today, but will be with us at Trinity next week.) He has a ministry that is largely among widows. Many or most of their husbands were killed during Rwanda's 1994 genocide. And when you talk about the lives of widows in a place like Rwanda, it's not that different from the experience of widows in these biblical stories. I have traveled with him into villages all across Rwanda and into the neighboring countries of central Africa, into the homes of widows who, very much like the widow of Zarephath and the widow in the temple we heard about today, live lives on the very margins of society – vulnerable lives of deprivation and sometimes abuse of various kinds. I'm picturing in my mind the home of one widow that was little more than a hut made of sticks, with rain pouring in through her roof.

Biblical widows lacked a couple of basic things we take for granted today: they lacked the ability to inherit property or pensions from their deceased husbands, and any kind of government social security program. Widows in biblical times were often left without any means of support when their husbands died. Our two biblical widows today fit into that category. They were sometimes even vulnerable to the religious institutions of their day, as we hear in Jesus' critique of the scribes who "like to walk around in long robes" and love "the places of honor

at banquets,” but who “devour widows’ houses.” We even hear the Lord commanding the widow in Zarephath to feed the prophet when she doesn’t even have enough to feed herself and her son.

And then we even have to wonder about Jesus’ glorification of the widow’s sacrifice in the temple, when he says to the on-looking disciples that by offering her last two copper coins, she had given more than all those rich folks who were contributing to the treasury.

What are we to make of this?

On the other side of this tableau were those who had much, pouring great sums of money into the treasury, contributing, he says, “out of their abundance.” I was at a lunch meeting this week with the Executive Director of the Gates Foundation. I heard her talk about what it meant to work in an environment of great abundance, and the incredible ability of the foundation to make a difference in global health problems and even eradicate diseases around the world.

We should note that Jesus is not criticizing those who give out of their abundance. It’s good that those who can do! And we are grateful to them! His criticism is of those who do it to draw attention to themselves or who expect special treatment and status because of it. But the more important point to be drawn from this little scene is that he is *praising the spirit with which* the small gift from one who was so obviously vulnerable was given, because it was everything she had.

We may question her prudence and her judgment. And we may wonder whether Jesus’ glorification of her sacrifice has hurt vulnerable people who wish to emulate her sacrifice. But whether we ourselves identify with the wealthy in this story or the vulnerable widow, we should not fail to look just a little bit deeper at what Jesus wanted us all to see and to hear.

There’s a great contrast with another story we recently heard. You may remember the story of the rich man who came to Jesus in the tenth chapter of Mark – our gospel reading just a few weeks ago. He comes to Jesus asking what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. And after assuring Jesus that he had kept all the commandments, Jesus said, “there’s just one more thing: go, sell all of your possessions, and give the money to the poor. Then come and follow me.” The man was shocked, and he went away sad, “because he had many possessions.”

We can talk all we want about giving to the church – and we do that here this time of the year. (Watch your mailbox this week, in fact. You’ll be getting

something we hope you will read carefully, pray about, and respond to as faithfully as you can.) But what Jesus is really asking us for is not ten percent of what we have, or some dollar amount to help fund our parish budget this next year. He's asking us for absolutely *everything* – ALL of who we are. ALL of what we have. Absolutely everything to be placed in service to God's will and purpose, without reservation and without hesitation. It's challenging, is it not, for us to think in those terms.

You may consciously or unconsciously identify with one or the other – either the rich man from a few weeks ago or today's widow. But the truth is that both of them are part of who we all are.

The rich man in this story is a foil for that part of all of us that holds back, is pragmatic and in control, that places a high value on self-preservation and managing risk, and yes, that values self-indulgence and self-interest over sacrifice.

The widow in today's gospel is the antithesis of that. She represents the part down deep inside every human spirit that knows that we are better off when our lives are placed totally and unconditionally in God's hands; that considers all of our possessions and all that we have as a trust committed to our care by God and for God; that sets aside self-interest for the good of the whole; and that trusts in the loving mercy of the God who made us and gives us all things to care for our needs.

And Jesus understood that even though we are called to live in this way, it was one who had so little who could actually show us what that looks like, to live with that kind of trust, and to live into the freedom it represents.

One of the things I miss in our Rite II Eucharistic liturgies is the prayer of self-oblation (or self-offering) that is still preserved in the Rite I service. Along with the offering of the bread and wine at the table, it says,

And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

It doesn't need to have all those thees and thous to be beautiful. It could just say,

God, I give my whole self to you, because, well, that's what you made me for – every bit of me: my soul, my body, all my stuff... – and I give it to you as an offering back to you. And I ask that I and every one of us here might truly live up to what it is we are doing here when we receive this sacrament, these signs of Jesus' presence among us, and that we truly find that oneness with him that will finally make our lives complete.

Jesus offers us the example of a poor widow, willingly offering all she is and all she has, as the picture of what it looks like for us finally to be one with God – Christ dwelling in us and us dwelling fully in Christ.

I'd like to leave you this morning with a poem by Howard Thurman. He is the late, great African-American author, philosopher, theologian, civil rights leader, and sometime Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University (among other important posts he held). In one of his many books, this one titled, *Deep is the Hunger*, he writes these moving words, with which I will close this morning:

But I must let go of everything.  
I must let go of everything but God.  
But God – May it not be  
That God is in all the things to which I cling?  
That may be the hidden reason for my clinging.  
It is all very puzzling indeed. When I say  
"I must let go of everything but God"  
What is my meaning?  
I must relax my hold on everything that dulls my sense of Him,  
That comes between me and the inner awareness of His Presence  
Pervading my life and glorifying  
All the common ways with wonderful wonder.  
"Teach me, O God, how to free myself of dearest possessions,  
So that in my trust I shall find restored to me  
All I need to walk in Thy path and to fulfill Thy will.  
Let me know Thee for myself that I may not be satisfied  
With aught that is less." (-Howard Thurman 1899-1981,  
*Deep Is the Hunger*)

Amen.