

Sermon: *The Nature of the Gift* I Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44
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Paula Dusseljee, Pastoral Associate First Lutheran Church Muskegon, Michigan 49445

Two of our readings this week feature widows. Two women who find themselves in destitute situations. The widow in I Kings is gathering sticks to prepare what she senses is her last meal - for her *and* her child. The widow in our gospel lesson today is also destitute. And she is not gathering, she is giving; giving the very last penny she has to the treasury, to the establishment. She will walk away homeless. A widow, now stripped of any sense of security she may or may not have had initially. Poor, impoverished, and penniless.

This week I found myself going back and forth between the lives of these widows. And we find these stories at this time in our church year due to the fact that most churches are in the midst of stewardship campaigns. Quite frankly, I remember these stories as a child and when the pledge cards were handed out the minister posed this question to the congregation, "Are you giving out of your abundance and blessings?" The minister also added, "Be like the widow - who gave it all away. I don't recollect him saying anything about poverty.

Perhaps today, however, the widow who encounters the prophet Elijah in I Kings *and* the one who Jesus is observing from the periphery of the treasury, have something more to offer us besides wealth management. Something to sustain us beyond the walls that keep us bound by our circumstances. Two widows, a prophet, scribes and Jesus, and you, and me.

Let's start with the story about the widow in I Kings. The prophet Elijah is weathering a drought - a drought that was in judgment of a nation's rampant idolatry and leadership. And of course, it was the prophet who delivered the news of this drought to the king (Ahab) in the first place. But God takes care of Elijah during this time of famine. He sends birds to feed him bread and meat and he drinks from the riverbed. Safe. Secure. Satisfied. Good start to the story, right? However, Elijah cannot stay there, we rarely can when working for God, right? And so it was the case for Elijah when the word of the Lord comes to him and he's off and running to Zarephath. A city belonging to Sidon in Phoenicia - in the heart of Gentile territory. And low and behold he meets a woman outside the city gate. A woman, a widow with a son. In actuality, she's a single mother who Elijah happens to meet outside the city gates. This woman is gathering sticks for what we learn may well be the last supper for her and her son.

But what happens next is really quite amazing. Elijah asks the woman for food and water and...and get this... the widow responds to Elijah's request!!

Now you have to understand, the Hebrew word for widow resembles the meaning “to be mute.” Widowhood you see, creates a type of social muteness. Remember the hierarchical structure in that day - women and children had no status. The bottom rung on the ladder or maybe not even a step. But this widow is anything BUT voiceless.

She said to Elijah, *“As the Lord your God lives, in other words - trust me, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; you encountered me now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die.”*

What do women do even in the midst of despair - they feed their children! During Bible study today, we discussed why the widow may have broken ‘protocol’ and spilled her story. Perhaps it may have been out of desperation or maybe even beyond desperation, which enabled her to step across cultural and social boundaries in order to care for her son. A widow, a mother, ‘hanging onto life (hers and her sons) by a thread’, opens herself up to a male stranger. This woman, you see, is laboring under a death sentence. I can’t help but visualize the women in Gaza right now. Gathering sticks, stoking a fire, heating mere morsels of substance to feed their children, knowing that tomorrow they may die.

I must say, this storyline has become all too real for me but could it be that this widow, this Gentile woman, this woman of no means becomes the active agent in the Realm of God. God you see, specializes in feeding the hungry, regardless of ethnicity, locality, gender, marital status, religion. And interestingly enough, in spite of what would normally be taboo according to the laws and customs of the ancient world, the widow is opened up to God’s abundance. Great story, isn’t it?

Then there’s the gospel story from Mark and another widow. What is it about the vulnerable, that so many stories in the Bible addresses and Jesus talks about? What is it about those without power, those outside of the traditional system of household economy, those caught in the crosshairs of laws or customs that exploit them? Or those who are left behind when policy change is geared, not to the oppressed, but to the powerful?

The widow in the gospel story today touches my heart for many reasons. One reason is I think of my mother when I hear this story. I still remember her filling out her giving envelope every Sunday morning. \$2 to the building fund; \$2 to the mission fund; \$2 to the general fund. Every, single, Sunday. It’s what she had. And I am grateful for her faithfulness. But remember what I said about stories early on? Those that bring about laughter and tears and...and provide me with a new perspective about what is going on in my life, or what is happening in the world around me.

So it is with the plight of the widow in the gospel story today, that shifts my focus of this story and brings me into a new way of thinking about God's economy and my role in it. You see, I don't think the story has is so much on the scribes or the rich or the poor widow as she gives everything she has, but maybe, just maybe the story is speaking more on what *Jesus* does: he sees this widow. *He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.* Among all the people putting money into the Temple treasury, Jesus notices her. David Lose writes, "Whatever it is that he wants his disciples to learn from her, perhaps the first lesson... is simply to notice her. To see her. To acknowledge her person, her being, her plight, and her offering. She is not, in the end, an object lesson, but a person. Easily unseen, even invisible, yet worthy of Jesus' attention, and ours."

Wow! The widow is a real person. It's easy to put some label on her so we don't have to think about her very much. We often claim the term "less fortunate" or we bury the "less fortunate" in policies and laws that create numbers, negativity and glaring injustice. Why do we assume that the widow's poverty has anything to do with fortune, or luck or her own neglect of knowing better? Yes, Jesus denounces the scribes as they prance around in all their lengthy robes dripping with piety, a pretense of power. Jesus sees the widow and he sees what is wrong with the power structure that has created the poverty.

You know, I think sometimes we call people "less fortunate" because we think it avoids placing a negative stigma on poverty. I remember, as director of a mentoring program, Kids Hope, the training addressed the issue of calling the student's we work with, "at risk." Perhaps they were at risk of failing subjects, living in less than healthy environments, eating government food, or not being a productive member of society, but they were kids that needed love and needed someone to *see them*. But when we call someone "less fortunate" we are automatically labeling that person as less valuable than we are, we who consider ourselves "more fortunate." Neither poverty nor wealth have anything to do with our role in the kingdom of God. Yes, there are times when a person's financial condition changes because of circumstances beyond his or her control or due to it. But more often, our broken social systems determine the difference between poverty and wealth. But things valued in God's kingdom differ from the human realm.

We need laws. We need leaders. We need love. In our government, in our churches, in business and in other settings. But Jesus, using the scribes as a lens, *sees the widow*. Jesus sees her!! He...sees...*her*. I know this has been a week (a season) of many emotions for all of us. But regardless of who you voted for or regardless of who won, we are called to take care of each other as God desires. We can stand against laws and policies that exploit the poor and the most vulnerable. We can advocate for a system that does not leave anyone behind. And we can be a participant in the divine justice that flows from who we are as children of God.

Two widows. Two women. Two widowed women, living in the margins of society. Destitute. Lonely. But loved. A divine love that sees their despair and meets their needs. A divine love that participates in wholeness and justice for all people. You know, we too, are a part of this divine love. And we, too, can be a participant in this divine love. We can make a difference; our words and actions can help bring more fully to fruition the realm of God's kingdom, here and now. And perhaps, just maybe the first step is to notice the widow, to notice the homeless, the immigrant, the oppressed, tearful child who lost a parent or failed a test; to notice... to see... to really see, the people who pass through our lives ignored and forgotten. So I ask my self this question today, "Paula, what do you have to offer? What do we, First Lutheran, have to offer? Ourselves. Amen.