

## **The poor widow**

The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector  
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church  
Virginia Beach VA 23452  
November 11 2018

The lectionary presents three stories this week that all have widows involved. We heard some of Ruth this morning where the widow Naomi has been accompanying Ruth. We have the poor widow of the gospel and in an alternate reading to the Ruth passage there is the 1 Kings story of the widow at Zarephath. There is a common thread among all of these passages that merits some attention.

First let me add in the 1 Kings reading that is track 2 reading (we are using track 1 this year). "The word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, "Go now to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and live there; for I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath. When he came to the gate of the town, a widow was there gathering sticks; he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am 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." Elijah said to her, "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain on the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord that he spoke by Elijah.

The widow in this story has a son, we do not know how old he is or for that matter how old she is. However we do know that she is obviously poor and almost out of food. Elijah assures her that if she uses what appears to be that last bit of meal and oil to feed him, she will not go hungry, the jar will not be empty and it proves true. She then feeds Elijah until the time comes for the famine in the land to end and he goes on to be a great prophet.

In Ruth we have two widows without means, Naomi and Ruth Naomi her mother in law sends her to her relative Boaz with very specific instructions. Boaz takes Ruth as his wife and the ultimate result of this marriage is Jesse, the father of David.

Being a widow was not something a woman wanted to be in those days because this almost certainly meant a life of poverty.

Then we have the gospel passage from Mark and another widow figures prominently. This passage has two parts, the teaching about the scribes and the scene at the

treasury. It is not completely clear that these two are tightly connected but that is how they are treated in the lectionary.

The setting, which as always is important, is after the cleansing of the temple, but before the last supper. The scribes and other temple leaders are really upset with Jesus. They question his authority and there are multiple exchanges between Jesus and the temple authorities. This is also the chapter in Mark where he answers the question what is the greatest commandment.

So who were these scribes that are questioning Jesus? Why was he so upset with them? Originally secular officials, scribes were highly educated in writing, legal and financial dealings. This placed them in contact with those who had money. After the exile and the building of the second temple with the focus on the law, they became powerful in the religious community as well.

This power made them seek fame and many wanted to become the center of attention. They demanded and were given respect. They wanted the “best seats” in the synagogue. And of course the best seats at the banquet also meant the best food and wine. They liked to dress in fine clothes and in general show off their wealth and power. In short some of them were the exact examples of what Jesus saw was wrong about the temple power and worship system. Do note that this first part starts with a huge denunciation of these scribes as one who devour the houses of widows.

Then we have the second half where Jesus takes a seat across from the treasury. . There were two ways that people would give a gift to the temple. The offering could be taken to the priest who would announce the amount of the gift and the purpose. Somehow I suspect this was with great drama and praise for the great giver. Or it would involve dropping coins into one of 13 trumpet shaped receptacles in the court of women. Now this is not a pledge card, a check or even paper money being placed in these brass trumpets. These were coins and I suspect they made sure there were plenty of them. Think how that would sound!

That would certainly make for quite a show with lots of noise. You can almost see them saying “Look at me, I’m special. I am wonderful. I am generous.” And of course that also means, I am better than you.

Then comes the widow. I wonder how much noise do you suppose her gift would make. Would the priest proudly announce what she gave? Was she embarrassed by how small her gift was?

From the days of the prophets, widows were to be cared for, but there is evidence that these scribes rather than caring for the widows were apparently taking advantage of them. Taking their last penny to run the temple. Which by the way Jesus had already declared corrupt and deserving to be torn down. He was not talking about the temple itself but the entire system of temple worship. That is what was behind the cleansing of the temple on the previous day.

Yet this widow does the remarkable. Like the widow of Zarephath she offers up all that she has. Whether the scribes have taken advantage is not as important as her willingness to offer up, to make a sacrificial gift to further God's kingdom. In my years of mission work I have consistently found that those who have the least tend to be the most generous in responding to needs that they see. I found this in Honduras, Venezuela, the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Katrina and other times of working around those who have little. They also tend to not to make a big deal of their gift and that is certainly a part of today's gospel in particular.

Did you know that to make a sacrifice comes from a Latin and means to make holy. When we act sacrificially we make holy what we offer. This is at the heart of the meaning of generosity, which has been our theme for all of this stewardship season. To give generously, to act generously, to love generously means to do it without thinking about what you will get in return.

I want to challenge all of you but our youth in particular to find a way over the next week or two to act generously, to do something for someone else, but to do it without the person who receives that knowing that you did it. If we would learn to live and love generously our world would be a much better place.

I close with some words from our Presiding Bishop that was posted on Facebook this week:

Love can be sacrificial. And in so doing, becomes redemptive. And that way of unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love can change lives and it can change this world. If you don't believe me, just stop and think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when this way of love is the way. Imagine our neighborhoods and communities when love is the way. Imagine our governments and nations when love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when this love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way. No child would go to bed hungry in such a world as that. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history.

This is what a world of generosity would look like and this sure seems to be what the kingdom will look like.