

November 10, 2024
Lectionary 32, Year B
The 25th Sunday after Pentecost
1 Kings 17:8-16
Mark 21:38-44
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Open Questions

What are we to think of these stories? These stories of these two women, these two widows, found in our Old Testament reading and in the gospel reading for today? Are we supposed to admire them? Are we supposed to be impressed? Are we supposed to admire them for their acts of generosity? Are we supposed to be impressed with the way that they give all they have, for the prophet, for the Temple?

The widow of Zarephath in today's Old Testament reading took hospitality and faith to an extreme when she gave up some of the last food that she had to the prophet Elijah. That food was supposed to be her last meal, her son's last meal. It was all she had, not to live on, but to die on.

At any point in the story, she could have ignored the prophet. She could have pretended that she didn't hear him when he asked her for water. She could have been so wrapped up in her own thoughts, her own grief, her own hunger that she really didn't hear him, tuned in only to her own suffering.

Instead, she heard him, she tried to help him, willingly going to get him a cup of water and finally taking the risk, taking the chance of sharing the little bread that she had with him, knowing that, unless the far-fetched words of the prophet came true, it would mean that she and her son would die hungry, as they had lived hungry.

Then there's the woman in the gospel reading, the widow, who is noticed by Jesus, when she was putting her last two coins into the treasury of the Temple.

This is what Jesus says about her offering:

Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. (Mark 12:43-44)

These two women, these two widows make good characters, Characters that stick in the memory, part of good, interesting stories. But I wonder what we would think if we knew these women, if they are our friends, our aunts, our mothers.

I wonder what we would think if we read their stories in the newspaper. I wonder what we would think of their faith and their generosity.

I suspect that there would be some who would think that they were a bit foolish. We might wonder, what did they expect to happen next? Who did they expect to care for their needs?

This is less of a pressing question for the widow of Zarephath. She was expecting to go home, eat her last meal with her son, and die. That was all she had left to hope for, death on a full stomach.

We have no way of knowing what the widow in the gospel reading was thinking. It could have been something like what the widow of Zarephath was thinking. She could have been thinking as she heard her last two coins in the world, which were, by themselves, far less than anyone, even in her time, could have lived on even for one day, drop into the collection box, that all that was left for her was for her to die.

Or maybe she could have been thinking that once she was penniless, someone would have to help her. Maybe she thought she would become a ward of the Temple, living there, eating there. Maybe she just thought she would just leave it up to God. That God would find a way for her to live, or God would let her die.

Maybe she was giving up any illusion she had of control over her own fate, by the physical act of putting those two coins in the treasury.

Regardless of what the women themselves were thinking, though, I'll bet if it happened today there would be people who would think, when confronted by the desperation of these women's plights, "What did they do wrong to get themselves into these situations?"

So, before we do anything else, let's give some thought to how these women got into these desperate situations: last meal, last two coins. Nothing left for them but death, or the charity of the people of God.

There's a lot we can't know about these women. We don't know who their husbands were or how they died, making their wives widows. We don't know if they had ever been rich and had fallen on hard times, or if they had always struggled to make ends meet.

Here's what we do know about the widow of Zarephath. We know that her situation was weather related. In fact, we don't actually know if she was impoverished at all. What we do know is that there was a drought in her land, and she, like so many before her and since, had learned the truth that you can't eat money.

There was a drought in her land. There had been a drought for a long time, and nothing could grow. No grain, no olive trees. She might have had plenty of money to buy food, but there was no food to buy.

Why was there a drought? Because of King Ahab. King Ahab had married a foreign woman named Jezebel, and had turned away from worshipping the God of Israel. He had erected temples and altars to Baal, and he worshipped the Canaanite gods, who were believed to have power over the rain. He prayed to the false gods for rain and no rain fell.

And the true God, the God of Israel, had sent the prophet Elijah to the king to tell him, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word." (1 Kings 17:1)

There was a drought because of the sins of the king. And all the people suffered. Trickle down idolatry. Trickle down catastrophe. Except of course, the whole problem was that nothing was trickling down.

The widow of Zarephath, which was not even in Israel, and her son, were caught up in the consequences of the sin of a faraway king. Globalization before its time, the butterfly effect.

As for the widow in our gospel reading, we know even fewer of the details of her story. We don't know who she was as a person.

But what we do know is that, according to the words of the law and the words of the prophets, what happened to her should never have happened at all. She should have never come to the point where she had nothing to live on.

In the law found in Deuteronomy the Hebrew people are told that they are to care for the most vulnerable among them, including widows and orphans.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.
(Deuteronomy 24:19-22)

Those who were blessed enough to have fields and jobs to provide for themselves were supposed to leave some of their crop behind for those who were hungry, for those who had no means of supporting themselves.

Over and over in the prophets, the people of Israel and Judah were criticized for not keeping this law, for not taking care of those who were in need and at risk and even for writing laws to take advantage of the poor in their poverty.

Here these words from the prophet Isaiah:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!
What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the calamity that will come from far away?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth,
so as not to crouch among the prisoners
or fall among the slain?
For all this, [God's] anger has not turned away;
[God's] hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1-4)

Perhaps all of this was in Jesus' head just before he saw the widow put her two coins into the collection box, when he saw the scribes of the temple, walking around in their fine robes and said:

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. (Mark 12:38-40)

The religious tradition seems to be clear on one point about the widow in today's gospel reading. Regardless of what she did or didn't do, regardless of who she was or wasn't, by the laws of God, she should never have been put into a position where she had nothing left to live on but two small coins that couldn't have sustained her anyway.

In some ways both of the widows in today's stories could be looked at as collateral damage. Victims of the actions of the wealthy and powerful in their society, who didn't care about, who didn't even see those who their actions harmed as people.

We know what happened to the widow of Zarephath. She lived and her son lived. She trusted the words of the prophet and shared her bread and miraculously, she and her household ate for many takes and their oil and grain did not run out.

We don't know what happened to the widow in the Temple, who had empty hands after her last two coins had gone into the collection box. We are left hanging, there is no ending to her story. And she is left empty-handed.

She stands before us, as a question, as a challenge. Are her empty hands held out to us?

It is as if the question is asked of us, as if all of the impoverished widows of the world are crying out to us, Holding out to us their grief, their poverty, their loneliness their vulnerability. It is even as if Jesus is asking us, what will happen to her? What will happen to them? Who do they belong to? Whose daughters are they, whose sisters, whose mothers, who will be their friend? Whose responsibility are they, when the wealthy and powerful turn their backs?

Through the prophet Elijah, God was the miracle for the widow of Zarephath. But for the widow in the Temple and for all of the impoverished of our day and our time, who will be the miracle for them?