

## **Sermon for November 8, 2009: the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost**

Widows run thorough the lessons today.

It is a word and status that we think about less then perhaps our ancestors did.

For most of human history, widowhood was for most women a sentence to poverty.

You know the often-repeated sentence from William Blackstone's commentary on the common law:

*By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband; under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs every thing.*

For most of our history, a wife deprived of her husband was without wing, protection, or cover.

Society was not organized to give her a chance to live independently; she had little access to the means of production.

When my great-grandfather died, in the prime of his life, in 1917 in the influenza pandemic, his wife and three daughters abandoned the farm that they could not farm on their own and moved in with my great grandmother's parents in town.

There, my grandmother always complained, they were treated like domestic servants.

Those of you who have lived a long time have seen that change in your lifetimes.

Now there is life insurance for young families. If I depart this world earlier than I hope, I will leave a comfortable widow behind.

Our creaky old Social Security program keeps old women out of poverty and provides support to those orphaned at a tender age.

Thus, like many of the metaphors and experiences of the Bible, widowhood in its ancient sense is something of a stretch for us.

The widows who run through the Bible are often placeholders for a wider category of person; the old Testament sometimes speaks about widows and orphans and foreigners.

These were the powerless in their own day.

Persons who who had little chance of shaping their life in positive direction, little chance to make decisions between possible courses of action, little hope to flourish in the freedom that so many of us enjoy in our largely free and hopeful society.

These were the people, like the widow of Zarephath, who were ready to give up, to make a little bread, eat a final meal and die.

The divisive question I could ask and let you answer in your own reflection is this: who and where are the widows of Zarephath today?

Who are trapped by their circumstances? Who has almost no choices? Who starts life out so far behind that they will never catch-up?

Some would say children growing up on Taggart Street or Meeks Alley; others would point to those at the bottom of our globalized economy, men, women, and children trapped under corrupt, incompetent, and indebted governments around the world.

And of course, we know regular middle class folks whose lives are terribly constrained by depression or anxiety, addiction, troubled relationships, or illness.

Our politics will lead us to answer that question, who are the widows of Zarephath today, differently. That's fine.

But we all do need to ask the question, because we must be aware that the scriptures speak very clearly to God's abiding, particular concern for the widows and orphans of our world.

If we are to be God's people, the powerless and hungry must be in our hearts all the time.

Look at the miracle in First Kings, how the Lord made the meal and oil last and last for the sake of the widow, the orphan, and the prophet.

Think, how many, many places in the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear that God ordered Israel to care for the widow and orphan and stranger;

It is right here in the psalm we sang: "*The Lord loves the righteous; the Lord cares for the stranger; he sustains the orphan and the widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked.*"

I want us all to be on God's side in history; we may not always agree on who are the powerless, the essentially widowed among us, but surely we must agree that in a world broken by human sin, there are those whose only hope is in the strong God of righteousness who has promised not to forget them.

The poor and widowed know this better than those of us of greater means, that God is finally the only one with the power to save.

"Put not your trust in rulers nor any child of earth, for there is no help in them...but happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help," also from today's Psalm.

Some in Jesus' day wanted to trust the scribes, with their long robes and education respected position.

But they, like most clergy, lawyers, accountants and other professionals direct most of their attention to those who are not widowed, who have money and choices and resources.

The poor know not to spend too much time on the scribes and that God has the power to save, to put the world to rights, and that God wants all of us to get with God's program.

It is telling that it is not the highly trained male scribes who understand God's will in the Gospel lesson; it is the widow, the one who has learned that God is trustworthy.

Let me play with the metaphor of widowhood a moment longer.

It is related, of course, to the Bible's persistent interest in seeing humanity's relationship with God as a cosmic marriage.

Typically, of course, God is seen as the groom and humanity as the bride.

We understand the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs to be about Christ's longing for his beloved church.

I say at every wedding that marriage signifies for us the mystical union of Christ and his church through his incarnation and our baptism into his saving death.

And the prophets of course, often portrayed Israel as a wife who had abandoned God, her faithful husband.

Could I stretch to say that we who turn away from God so often essentially make ourselves spiritual widows?

When we abandon the lives of prayer and service and holiness that are God's will, we announce an intention go our own way, into the unbridled individualism of a godless materialism.

And we deprive ourselves of the power of this righteous God.

We have a God who is our wing, protection, and cover, a God who has reclaimed us in the most intimate way in Jesus Christ; a new and eternal life is offered to us.

We can live generous, self-emptying lives; our God will not leave us in mourning; the meal and oil will last; our bridegroom will surely come.