

Today as we prayed the psalm we heard that “the Lord cares for the stranger and sustains the orphan and widow.” (146:8) The Bible uses the phrase “widows and orphans” as a kind of code-language to speak about the most vulnerable members of society. Social Security and life insurance policies and gains made for women in the marketplace have all helped to alleviate the profound economic dangers that women and children without a male bread-winner face. But in Biblical times, and until very recently in human history, becoming a widow almost certainly put one at great risk economically.

Today I want to tell you about three widows: Ruth, the unnamed woman from today’s gospel reading, and a twentieth-century widow named Margaret.

We heard the end of the story of Ruth in today’s Old Testament reading. The key to understanding the power of the story is that Ruth is not a Jew but a foreigner—a Moabite woman. Some scholars think the story dates to post-exilic times when marriage was a hot topic for Jewish theologians. People like Ezra and Nehemiah felt that the Exile came about because of Israel’s disobedience to Torah and they came back home with a focus on ritual purity and strict obedience to the Torah. Among other things, they focused on marriage laws and enacted prohibitions against interfaith marriages, especially to Moabites.

Whether the story of Ruth actually dates from this post-exilic context or existed in some form much earlier, the theological point is essentially the same. Naomi, a Jewish woman, has two sons who both marry outside of the faith by marrying Moabite women: Ruth and Orpah. Then Naomi’s husband and both of her sons die, leaving all three women as widows. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their families not because she doesn’t care for them but because she does: because she loves them she encourages them to go home and re-marry and get on with their lives. Orpah takes her mother-in-law’s advice, but Ruth insists that she will not leave Naomi alone:

*Wherever you go, I’ll go; wherever you lodge, I’ll lodge. Your people will be my people.
Your God will be my God.*

So this Moabite widow travels back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law; in so doing she models covenantal love and faithfulness. The point of the story is that she is a more faithful “Jew” than most of her day. If in fact this text does come from the post-exilic period it has a bit of an edge to it aimed directly at those who would prohibit marriage to “unclean” Moabites. The kicker, however, comes at the end: Ruth’s mother-in-law sets her up with a new Jewish husband, Boaz, in order to “seek some security for you.” As we heard today, this Moabite woman and her second husband, Boaz, have a child whose name is Obed who is the father of Jesse who is the father of David. Or to say this all another way: King David is the result of a mixed marriage: he’s one-eighth Moabite. Ouch! It gets even more interesting for Christians when you follow the story into the New Testament where in Matthew’s genealogy, Ruth is one of four women named in the family tree of a Bethlehemite near and dear to our hearts.

The second widow I want to tell you about is the one Jesus himself notices in today’s gospel reading thousands of years later. He is criticizing the rich because they think that their giving ought to buy them power and respect and prestige. Their giving comes with a *quid pro quo*. Jesus calls our attention to this widow who walks up and gives two small copper coins, about a penny, commenting that...

...she has put in more than the rest, for they contributed out of their wealth but she gave out of her poverty: she put in all she had, everything she had to live on.

It always kills me to see this story be twisted, especially by well-off persons who say, “see, it doesn’t matter how much you give.” My sisters and brothers: that is absolutely not the point of this story. In fact, Jesus is saying just the opposite: it does matter how much you give. If one of those rich people went up and put two pennies in the plate Jesus would not be pointing them out in a positive light. The issue here is about whether or not our giving is sacrificial. The wealthy ones whom Jesus is criticizing can afford to write out big checks, but relative to their wealth they don’t give generously or sacrificially. They feel important and to some extent the temple depends on their largesse but they are not the model Jesus sets before his disciples and before us.

In contrast, this woman has nothing. She is easy to miss because she isn’t driving a fancy car to temple or going home to a big house. She’s on a fixed income; yet she is faithful. And above all, her giving back to God is a priority in her life—in fact it is *the* priority of her life. If you reflect on Jesus, the Jewish rabbi, then you can see how he is turning the table by pointing to her. For centuries his people have been taught to care for widows and orphans. While necessary, it can also be patronizing at some level. The poor can become invisible except as some generic “category.” But Jesus suggests that they need to see the widow before them—really *see* her, and look to her as their model.

We don’t have to look to the past to find this lonely widow in a first-century temple in Jerusalem, however because we are surrounded by such witnesses. I believe this story quite literally (as most people who have served on the Stewardship Committee of churches like this do) because we get to see it unfold here year after year. It is amazing how often it is, even in our day as well, women and men on fixed incomes who have, over many decades, committed to making their giving come first rather than last. And they often do much more to support the Church than those who have much more “disposable” income. They model generosity and sacrificial love for all of us to emulate.

One such witness in my own life brings me to my third widow this day: my grandmother, Peg Miller. Her husband, my grandfather, died just before Christmas, when my mother was still a little girl. So I never met him. My two uncles had already left home at the time of my grandfather’s death, which left my grandmother on her own to raise my mother as a single parent. My grandmother never re-married. When I say she had next to nothing I mean it quite literally; she had only a small social security check each month to live on.

And yet she was one of the most generous people I have ever known. I never heard her complain about money, except on the rare occasion when she would give one of us a gift at Christmas or on our birthdays and say something like, “I so wish it could be more.” Never, however, did I hear her complain about money for her own sake. The only reason she ever wished she had more was to be able to share it.

The thing that amazes me is that while I loved my grandmother very much, she was not completely unique. She was formed and shaped by a culture that was willing to do with far less, a world that valued sacrifice and generosity. We worry about H1N1 and that is understandable, but my grandmother lost a brother in the prime of his life to the Influenza of 1918. We worry about the economy and we should, but she quit school to help her mother out during the Great Depression.

We worry about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and rightly so; she lost two brothers in the Great War that was supposed to end all wars—the war which finally ended on 11-11 at 11 as we will remember this coming Wednesday. Those difficult experiences could have broken her, but amazingly they left her stronger and more courageous and generous and optimistic. My point is not to suggest that those who lived through the events of 90 years ago had it harder than we did but simply that we have a choice in how we respond to challenges: we can do so with faith or with fear. And we should not forget that it is difficult and challenge that has the potential to shape the greatest generations.

The focus of this sermon is on three widows and there is a reason the Bible speaks of widows, along with orphans, as people who are vulnerable. But I don't mean to suggest that generosity of spirit is limited to widows and the Bible doesn't either. It's just that there is no substitute for experiencing our own vulnerability, which then leads us to acknowledge our utter dependence upon God. That, I think, is the common thread here. As long as we hold onto the illusion that we are in control, we live as if all that we can hold onto is "ours." Many of us live valuing *security* above all else. I know this is my own temptation. I am not a person who values fancy cars or clothes very much and am fortunate that my nature is to be pretty content with what I have. (I do, admittedly, think life is too short to drink bad wine and I enjoy good food a little too much.) But more even than those things what I want is to make sure things are covered and ducks are lined up: retirement and college funds and healthcare in our old age. There is a part of me that figures if I can control those things all will be well.

But that is an illusion. It's not an argument not to be prepared, but we deceive ourselves when we begin to believe that we are in control. We cannot number even the hairs on our head. We can build silos like the man in Jesus' parable to prepare for events ten or twenty years from now and then drop dead tomorrow. When the illusion of security is stripped away as it was for these three amazing widows (and as it was, by the way, for the Israelites over forty years in wilderness of the Sinai Desert) then there is an opportunity to discover a profound truth: what we get in this world is one day at a time.

Every time we gather together for the Eucharist we pray the prayer our Lord taught us, rooted in the experience of Sinai and the life of widows everywhere: *give us this day our daily bread*. And then help us to remember to say thank you. You and I are called to be faithful stewards of God's good gifts: of all that we have. That is true twelve months of the year, fifty-two weeks a year. And I pray that my preaching reflects that truth because it goes to the very heart of Christian discipleship. But during the month of November—between All Saints and Thanksgiving—we reflect more concretely on our own giving to support the annual budget of this parish and its ministries in the world. I submit to you that a good place to begin is by reflecting and praying on our vulnerability.

Now that is tricky because our vulnerabilities can lead us pretty quickly down the path to fear and anxiety. Our experience of vulnerability can make us worried that there isn't enough, and that fear can paralyze us. But with God's help, an awareness of our own precariousness can lead us in a different direction than paralysis. It can lead us to put our whole trust in God's love. It can lead us to a deeper awareness of our neighbors in need. From that place, and with God's help, we can discover a wisdom and a peace that passes all understanding. From that place, and with God's help, we can open our hearts and our hands to be more faithful and loving and generous servants of a faithful and loving and generous God.