

Weasels, Widows, and Wealth

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on November 6, 1994, the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time. Scripture Lessons: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-26, Mark 12:38-34.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In her book entitled, But I Never Thought He'd Die, published by Westminster Press, Miriam Baker Nye writes, "A freak accident, caused by gusty wind and rain-slick pavement, instantly took my husband's life. We had set out to do some business in the city, and had traveled less than five miles from home when the wind caught us. Carl received multiple head injuries when the door beside him swung open and the car overturned. Held by my safety belt, I received the merest scratches on my nose and knees. I was 'lucky,' some people said. How did they know what it meant to be happily married one minute and a fifty-one-year-old widow the next?"

Janet Porcino, in her book on aging, claims that eleven out of twelve wives who remain married become widows. The average age of widowhood is fifty-six years old. Sixty-eighty percent of all married women become widows by the age of seventy-five. She claims that forty percent of all older widows live on or below the poverty level. She writes that the economic burden on widows is second only to loneliness. I didn't realize this, but she claims that there's a so-called "widows gap" in the Social Security laws. A widow is not eligible for Social Security benefits until her youngest child is 18 or her own age is sixty.

The Bible is an honest book. It deals with reality. It doesn't try to avoid reality. But it looks at often painful reality in the light of the God who comes to

us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It's not surprising, then, that ^{Biblical} writers noticed ^{The Widow of Nain, The widow of Zaccaphath, Anna the prophetess} Jesus speaks of widows—^{widows were particularly vulnerable in a patriarchal world — oppression, hardship, poverty}

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus noticed a "poor widow." Poverty is not having what you need. Lack of money is not the only thing that impoverishes many widows. Loneliness is. The Bible tells us that in marriage, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves unto his wife, and the two become one." Mary Brite, a widow from Omaha, Nebraska writes, "widowhood is like being cut down the middle with a razor blade, then told, 'Now heal, and function!'" What makes a widow poor, above everything else, is the loss of someone who has become a part of herself.

Jesus noticed, not only a poor widow who put her last pennies in the collection place, he also talked about weasels who had quite a different attitude toward wealth. The kind of weasels that Jesus talked about are two footed weasels, weasels who walk around in flowing robes. They love being greeted in the marketplaces and seek the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. And they devour widows' houses like weasels in a chicken house. These kind of weasels, these human weasels, will be punished most severely, Jesus warns. So don't mess with widows!

But I want us to notice the widow. And, in particular, I want us to take home three lessons or applications on the basis of this story.

First, the story of the widow helps to open our eyes to see invisible people. Widows had very low visibility in the time of Jesus. Most people didn't notice

widows. The teachers of the law, the weasels in this story, are highly visible. You can't miss them in their flowing robes and where they sit in the most important seats and the places of honor. Widows, however, often go unnoticed. This poor widow is representative of all people, young or old, rich or poor, male or female ~~who~~ ^{whom we} pass by without seeing. These are the people who, so often, fall through the cracks in a church. These are the people who miss worship for several weeks and nobody notices their absence.

Widows, especially, can become almost invisible. A forty-four-year-old widow once wrote to "Dear Abby." The woman's husband had died, leaving her with three children - two teen-age boys and a daughter twelve years old. Friends and relatives had lavished attention upon the bereaved family at the time of the death and funeral. The last thing the widow heard from each of them was, "If you need anything, please call me."

In her letter the widow wrote, "Abby, I need *everything*. I need someone to take an interest in two teen-aged boys who have no father. I need someone to cheer me up when I'm feeling low. I need someone to dress up for. I need someone to get me out of the house and invite me to a movie, a bridge game, a play, a concert, or an evening of conversation so I will know I'm alive. A widow needs everything any other normal woman needs, but she can't call up her friends and ask them for anything."

There are so many invisible people in our congregation and town, not just widows, but all kinds of people. I confess that I am so often blind to some people.

Jesus noticed people most of us don't see. ^{like this poor widow} Jesus wants to open our eyes to see people who are hurting and invisible. But it takes effort. It takes sitting down with a membership directory and looking over the names systematically. On every page you will see the name of someone who was once active and present but who no longer is. One of the greatest challenges our congregation faces is the challenge to see people who have gone unmissed and unnoticed. Jesus wants to open our eyes to see people and reach out to them.

Second, the widow who put her last two pennies in the collection plate is a picture of the kind of commitment that God wants every Christian to have. Her giving was generous. Richard Foster, in his book, Money, Sex, and Power, recently reminded me that neither Jesus nor any of the apostles confined giving to the tithe - they went beyond it. In all their teachings, generosity and sacrifice loom large. This is true especially when we see the poor widow putting her two small copper coins in the collection plate.

Her giving was also risky. Most of us probably are too calculating and careful and reasonable in our giving. Richard Foster writes that, "For the sake of our own souls there are times when we need to throw caution to the winds and give, just give." We need to risk in our giving like the poor widow did.

Furthermore, the poor widow gave with no strings attached. I can well imagine that the poor widow could have thought of plenty of reasons to withhold her "two cents" from the temple collection plate. Yet she gave and Jesus honored her giving. There may be times when it's appropriate to withhold our giving out of

concern for how that money is being used. But the normal pattern is to give freely without any need to direct how the Church is using the money. This poor widow teaches us to give generously, with risk, and without strings attached.

Third, this poor widow's gift foreshadows the gift that Jesus is about to make, his very life. The apostle Paul says that "though (Jesus) was rich, yet for our sake became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). Widows were socially powerless and vulnerable in a world dominated by powerful men like the teachers of the law. And in the Gospel we see God, in Christ, become like that widow, powerless and vulnerable. In the Gospel we see God in Christ giving, like that poor widow- giving generously, with risk, and without any strings attached.

Most people today think of God in terms of what our culture says about God. Too often we think of God, not in terms of what the Bible says, but in terms of power and we think of power in terms of fear, in terms of ^{coercion} domination of others through violence if necessary. Is that how you think of God? If we do, our lives will come, more and more to resemble those men who use their power to gobble up the homes of widows. We become like the God we worship. If the God we worship is a God of power ^{coercion} and domination we'll aspire to become like that God.

But the Gospel tells us that God, the God whom we know in Christ, is like that poor widow. In the Gospel we see how God, in Christ, becomes more and more poor, more and more powerless until, finally, he gives everything and is nailed to a cross. The Gospel shows us a God who is "weak in power but strong in love," a God

willing to be vulnerable to pain and to shame, a God who allows himself to be gobbled up by the power and violence of men. Christians can't speak of God without speaking of the crucified and risen Christ.

If this is the God we worship, if this is the God to whom we pray, if this is the God whose face we seek - then we'll become more and more like the crucified - we'll notice those who are weak and vulnerable - those whom others seek to dominate and take advantage of. And we'll become more and more like that poor widow - ^{^ AND LIKE THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST -} willing to give generously, with risk, and without strings attached.