

I Kings 17: 8-16  
Psalm 116: 12-19  
Mark 12: 38-44

Prophetic Widows  
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I don't know if any of you have had the experience of reading a novel, then, after some years pass, reading it again, and finding some new take on it that totally changes its meaning. I remember the first time I read [A Passage to India](#) by E. M. Forster, I came to one conclusion about truth and prejudice in the trial of the main character. Then, reading it again, I couldn't believe what I had missed the first time. It looked completely different. The moral values were turned upside down.

Something similar happened to me this week when I read this morning's Gospel passage. It is extremely familiar: sometimes called the story of The Widow's Mite – a "mite" being another word for "2 small copper coins, which are worth a penny." I had always thought of this as a teaching about the poor woman's faith and courage. It is a beautiful example of giving to God first, I thought, out of our poverty, not out of our surplus. I have preached about it from that perspective. But this time, I said, "Wait a minute. Is this an example of the widow's faith or the institution's oppression?" Just before sitting down opposite the Temple Treasury to do some people-watching, Jesus condemns those ambitious scribes who like to be admired. He says, "They devour widows' houses." Maybe there is more going on here than different styles of generosity.

This week I did an alternate reading of the Gospel that seems more in line with Jesus' teachings in the chapters leading up to this one, in the last week before the crucifixion. Jesus has consistently sided with the poor and the outcast against the institutions of synagogue and Temple and Empire. Every chance he gets, he exposes those institutions when they value rules over love, stability over new life, and displays of power over gestures of humble service. This scene could be sub-titled: Jesus watches a bunch of rich guys preside over the donation of a widow's last 2 coins. She goes home destitute, and dies a few days later, of hunger.

We need to remember that the term "widow" meant something particular 2 and 3 thousand years ago. People lived in large family groups, extended households. If someone's spouse died, they would normally continue to live in that larger household, with work and meals and housing all included. The widows in both readings today had fallen through that safety net. The widow from Zaraphath lived alone with her small son and was running out of the basics for survival. Her lack of a larger family was practically a death sentence. She says as much to Elijah: "I am now gathering a couple of sticks to make a fire, so that I can make our last supper, and then die." I now see that these words make her as much of a prophet as Elijah. Only God's intervention will keep her words from coming true. Some thing was seriously wrong in Zaraphath, if a widow and her son could die of hunger unnoticed. But Elijah noticed. God noticed.

Jesus was good at noticing too. When he places himself outside the Temple Treasury, he is not just resting his feet. He is observing the seat of an institution that has compromised with a brutal empire, that emulates that empire's structures and magnificence and values, - that no longer protects the poor, but crushes them. When he speaks to his disciples about the widow, there is no

word of approval, no “go and do likewise.” Instead he makes a stark comparison between those who benefit from the system and those who are destroyed by it.

We did not read the beginning of the next chapter. In it, Jesus leaves the Temple, as if in disgust, for the last time. When his disciples remark on the grandeur of the building as they leave, he dismisses them with “not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” This is an institution that has no integrity or true authority because it has betrayed the spiritual ideals of its source. The action of the widow was prophetic because it made clear – to anyone who noticed – that something was seriously wrong in Jerusalem.

What should we do with these widow prophets, whether in Zaraphath or Jerusalem or in the United States? Should we clothe their actions with spiritual glamor or with painful realities? It could go either way, I suppose. Oseola McCarty was a prophet in the tradition of the nameless widows of the Bible. She died in 1999 at the age of 91. She was an African-American woman from Mississippi, who earned a living as a laundress. She was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade when she left school to take over her mother’s laundry business while she cared for a sick aunt. She never owned a car, didn’t have any luxuries. She only retired at 86 when her arthritis got so bad that she couldn’t work.

But, Ms. McCarty scrimped and saved so that she was able to leave \$150,000 to the University of Southern Mississippi to set up scholarships for needy African American students. "I want to help somebody's child go to college," Oseola said. "I just want it to go to someone who will appreciate it and learn. I can't do everything, but I can do something to help somebody. I wish I could do more. But what I can do I will do." Another 600 donors added money to the fund. Maybe they were inspired, maybe they were shamed by that stunning example of generosity.

Like the stories of the brave widow of Zaraphath or the brave woman at the temple treasury, Oseola McCarty’s is inspirational. And we need inspiration in order to be generous, in order to persevere in generosity. But there is something else that needs to be noticed and said: the way in which Ms. McCarty was prophetic in revealing what was really going on. She revealed a country and a system where a young person could not finish their schooling because resources were so limited. She revealed a world where a 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl was expendable. And she revealed a society where young African-Americans needed the life savings of a laundress to be able to afford their own education. In other words, something was seriously wrong in the USA.

We who belong to a faith community are challenged by all these stories. There is no simple and comforting way out of them: we have to labor through, open our eyes, and try to notice the way Jesus noticed. We who belong to the church have the challenge to hold several strands of our calling at once. Are we called to be generous? Yes, I think we are. We are called to invest our time, talent, substance, and influence in ways that draw us closer to the Kingdom of God. Are we called to trust God in dire situations, when all seems lost and we can’t imagine how we will survive until tomorrow? Yes, I think we are. We are called to the kind of faith that can grieve and perceive and persevere, open to the Word that calls us to new life. Are we called to actions that expose systems of exploitation and oppression, to be advocates for the “widows” or orphans or foreigners or outcasts? Yes, I think we are. We are called to be a community of compassion **and** prophetic action, noticing and naming and changing the way “business as usual” is conducted.

I turned to two people, not exactly in our congregational tradition, for more eloquent words about the need for a change in perspective. One is Pope Francis, who wrote:

*“We have forgotten and are still forgetting that over and above business, logic and the parameters of the market is the human being... men and women in as much as they are human being by virtue of their profound dignity...Precisely because it is human, all human activity, including economic activity, must be ethically structured and governed. We must return to the centrality of the human being, to a more ethical vision of activities and of human relationship without the fear of losing something.”* And, he wrote, *“For all our limitations, gestures of generosity, solidarity and care cannot but well up within us, since we were made for love.”*

Another prophetic voice comes from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who explain the South African concept of *Ubuntu*: *“One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity”.*

I invite you to listen to the stories of prophetic widows, and the words of popes and archbishops, and to notice and name and challenge. Of course I hope that you will be generous in this giving season. As a member of this church, I plan to contribute what I can. I will do this not to keep a magnificent structure or a beautiful building standing – though I do love this building as a sacred place of love and prayer. I will contribute because I believe that our generosity and faithfulness and prophetic resistance to injustice draw us closer to the Kingdom of God. They draw us closer to a blessed and unknowable future. In honor of all the prophetic widows in our tradition, in honor of each one who points the way to compassion and freedom and peace, I will give. Amen.