

24th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.8.15
Scripture:

It seems to be Widow Sunday here at church. The two stories we just heard, and the one we didn't, all featured widows who are exemplary.

Imagine: widows who are exemplary!

Actually, that's probably not that hard to imagine. Really, it's likely no shock at all that a widow might be someone we'd admire, even emulate. And why should that shock? After all, what a widow is simply someone who has outlived her husband—which might be sad or tragic if the husband died early or terribly or recently, or it might be a mere, neutral fact of some people's lives.

But it hasn't always been the case that widowhood was morally or socially neutral. No, there was a time when widows were to be pitied, terribly pitied—if not feared. To have outlived your husband: that is perhaps to display entirely too much power.

And for all I know, there are still such social contexts where widowhood is a fate worse than death. Isn't that what the practice of *sati* is at least partly about—when a widow immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre? It's mostly obsolete, but it happens now and again. And maybe that's not what *sati* is about—stripping a woman of the scary power of having outlived her husband. Maybe it's simply an expression of despair, the feeling that there is no future.

Widowhood was a tragedy in the Ancient Near East as well, but Hebrew custom and law at least attempted to address it humanely—if only through required acts of charity and not through a radical reconceiving of widowhood in general.

That would come later—maybe even with Jesus saying, in the story we *didn't* hear, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more [into the Temple treasury] than all those others... For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all that she had to live on.” Maybe it was with that moment in frequent memory that widowhood pivoted from being cause for despair to being a state that bears perhaps surprising promise.

Meanwhile, consider: a widow had little means of support, and none at all if she had no surviving sons. What's more, if a widow were still of childbearing age, any child she did bear would belong to the house of her first husband. This, of course, would make her an unattractive option for a man her age to marry, especially if that man had no children and looked for a wife in order to have them. Really, marrying a young widow would only give her deceased husband children, and yet would cost the living one a lot.

That's what was at stake for Boaz in his marrying Ruth. Of course, it was expected—it was assumed—that he would allow Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, to glean grain from his field following the field hands' harvest of it. He was, after all, a kinsman of Naomi, related on her deceased husband's side. What's more, he was wealthy, had grain to spare. What was unexpected, though, is how carefully he watched out for Ruth, telling her to glean only from his field and none other's, and to stay close with the young women who were also gleaning there, and to drink from the water that the young men had drawn, young men who'd been told not to bother her.

Why had he done these things? Why had he so considered Ruth, she asked him?

He answered, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." All of that, apparently, had been told to him.

But in case it hasn't all been told to you, here's what Boaz knew of what Ruth had done.

At a time when there was famine in the land, a man took his wife, whose name was Naomi, and their two sons to Moab to live. Here they'd do better, even though this was a land of gentiles, for here there was at least food. The two sons grew there, and took wives there—foreigners who were in all other ways good choices for the two sons. But then the father of the two sons died, and then the two sons themselves died—which left the three women, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth, all now widows.

Naomi decided to return to her homeland, perhaps because widowhood was a more tolerable state among the Hebrews. So she told her gentile daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as

you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud and said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

But Naomi said them, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters...”

So they wept aloud again—and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her, saying, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.”

So the two women left Moab together, returned to the land of Israel, and to the village of Bethlehem, where Naomi had lived and where Boaz still lived. And the two women gleaned in Boaz’s field until Boaz took particular notice of Ruth and then heard all that she had done.

That they all lived happily ever after—Boaz and Ruth and their sort-of mother—likely doesn’t surprise us nearly as much as it would have surprised those who first heard this story, or indeed those who perhaps lived this story. That these three people—a wealthy man, an old and destitute widow, and a young, destitute, and foreign widow—all together lived happily ever after: this would have been surprising indeed.

And all the more so when you remember that this story is contemporaneous with other events in the life of Israel that seem to underscore the importance of purity among the people, of clear lines, of clean comings together. This story is contemporaneous with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, both from the time of the end of the exile—when the people Israel had been forced from their once Promised Land and into Babylon and yet were now, seventy years on, faced with the opportunity to return to their homeland.

Of course, after about seventy or so years though, many Israelites had settled into life in Babylon quite well. They had married and made families of their own, they had (some of them) even grown old there while others, having been born there, had no memory of the land of Israel at all. Babylon was in many practical ways as home for many people, so “returning” to Israel is as if Jesse were to “return” to Poland (whence his grandfather came 80 years ago) or as if the 8 million undocumented immigrants in the United States were to “return” to Latin or South America.

And yet it was right there, in the Law that gave this people their identifying form and expression. Right there in the Law it said as much, that they are to live in that land. And now they could, and therefore they should. But who among them would? In the cases of mixed marriages, in the cases of children of those mixed marriages: who was Judean enough to return to the land of Judea?

Ezra and Nehemiah felt it was clear: only those born of Jewish women, only those who were in the strictest sense Jews. All others would stay behind.

According to the book of Ezra, there was at the dedication of the 2nd Temple much weeping, much crying aloud. It’s thought that these were tears of joy, of jubilation—to be back home, to be in the Temple again. But I wonder.

Contemporaneous to this historic event is the story of Ruth, a gentile who was not only just accepted, not even just welcomed in, but someone who became so central to the people Israel that she would become the grandmother of King David.

God is, it turns out, quite a sloppy god.

The widow of Zarapheth was just as vulnerable as either Naomi or Ruth, and perhaps more so because she didn’t have a partner in widowhood. Moreover, she didn’t even have Jewish law and custom to fall back on for she was a gentile, or at least it’s assumed she was, Zarapheth being a gentile region. Finally, though she had a son, she seems not to be benefitting from him, or at least not yet, which indicates that he was likely still a young child, meaning she was likely still a young woman. So, her widowhood, we might conclude, was a tragedy—amounting to the death of herself and of her son and maybe even of the whole household, making it as if none of them had ever been born.

It's promising, then, if you're in the know, that Elijah came along—for he was a prophet of the Lord, the God of Israel, who had only just been proven more powerful than the gentile weather God, Ba'al.

But if you're not in the know, he could easily have seemed like a common beggar, and a rude one at that. Without so much as a "hello," he tells her upon seeing her gathering sticks near the town gate, "Bring me a little water in a vessel. Bring me the morsel of bread in your hand." And, yes, maybe he didn't know the details of this poor woman's own tenuous survival. But he could well have guessed, especially when came her response, "As the Lord your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug. I am now gathering a couple of sticks so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Well, that sounds hyperbolic and more than a little manipulative, unless it's true, which it probably was. So it's hard for me not to hear Elijah's response to this without a sense of outrage, or at least indignation. "Do not be afraid," he said. "Go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterwards make something for yourself and your son." It would seem he's just told her to go ahead and die, but not before making him a cake.

But, you know, maybe we're missing something. Maybe in this raw sketch of what we should take, at least for our purposes this morning, as an actual encounter between actual human beings, a lot has been left out. That's the way it goes in the Bible: in most encounters and interactions, so much is left to our imagining and filling in. Tone of voice, facial expression, body language: really, maybe in Elijah's telling the widow of Zarepheth, "Do not be afraid," there was some deep assurance that this woman need not be afraid, that all would be well, in spite of so much evidence that all would *not* be well.

When Jack is worried about passing in front of a darkened doorway on his way to bed: "Do not be afraid, for we are with you."

When Toby is worried about the beginning of the school year in a new school among new—and bigger!—students, "Do not be afraid, for we are with you. We've got your back"

When I fear for the safety of everyone I love following the terrible, sudden, and senseless death of a young Lenox man hit by a drunk driver; when I fear what must be his mother's searing pain, and his sister and brother's terrified confusion; really, when the whole town feels subdued by anxiety and grief at the violent loss of a young man who was in many ways central: "Do not be afraid, for we are all together."

To be certain, fear is often the appropriate emotional response to things in life, but it can be met with faith, even quieted by faith; and, in any event, it shouldn't necessarily be the place from which we operate.

It's worth noting that the widow was willing to take Elijah at his word, which means either she was a coward—easily cowed, *too* easily cowed—or she was uncommonly brave. I'm going with the second choice. Really, being as vulnerable as a widow, I suppose, can result in two ways of being—easily cowed, or uncommonly brave. I'm going with the second choice. "Do not be afraid," Elijah said, and so she decided not to be afraid, instead to make him some food and some for herself and her son and her household. And life continued. One who thought there was no future found that that there was, that there is.

But all of this might be of little importance to you, to us. Really, all of this might be entirely irrelevant. After all, as I've said, widowhood is hardly what it once was. As a society, we've come to terms with it. As a culture and an economy, we can account for widowhood as a status without encouraging such widows to resort to ritual suicide or even resigned despair. It was once a problem. It is no more. Hallelujah!

But two economics professors, Angus Deaton and Anne Case, recently found that death rates among middle aged white Americans have ceased to decline at the same rate of death among people in the same age group but other ethnicities or among white people in other Western countries. Moreover, according to the *New York Times*, Drs. Deaton and Case "calculate that if the death rate among middle-aged whites had continued to decline at the rate it fell between 1979 and 1998, half a million deaths would have been avoided over the years from 1999 through 2013. That, they note, is about the same number of deaths as those caused by AIDS through

2015.” In other words, preventable deaths among middle aged white people in the last fifteen years has equaled in number to the death toll of AIDS overall.

Why?

The most immediate reason why—that is, the actual cause of death—appears to be suicide, drug abuse, and alcoholism. This is to say it’s not the usual suspects, which are obesity, heart disease, and hypertension. But this, of course, merely begs more questions, “Why?”

Again, the *Times* notes, “Recent reports of illness and disability might provide some clues. More middle-aged whites report that their general health is not good; and, more report chronic pain — neck pain, face pain, joint pain, sciatica. More report mental distress or mental illness. More say they have trouble walking a quarter mile or climbing stairs. More say they have trouble shopping or socializing with friends. More say they can no longer work...The dismal picture for middle-aged whites makes Dr. Deaton and Dr. Case wonder how much of what they are seeing might be attributed to the explosive increase in prescription narcotics.”

So, it seems we’re beginning, as a society, to understand that the real gateway drug we should worry about isn’t pot, it’s prescription painkillers. Oxycontin, oxycodone, are easy to get from your doctor, but they’re much costlier on the street. Once you’re hooked, heroin’s a cheaper option. And, ironically, it’s quite a bit easier for white people to get prescriptions for painkillers than it is for black or Hispanic people. Brown and black people have to be in much more pain before doctors will prescribe something to dull it. Empathy gap? I guess so. Racism apparently has an upside—if a perverted one.

I mention all of this because it’s clear that, though widowhood, is no longer a cause for despair—a cause for those in this strata to suspect they have no future—there are new widows in our midst, there are apparently many people who suspect they have no future, or if they have one, it’s but painful and distressing. And what’s arguably worse is that there’s no ritual way to escape such a dismal fate. There’s no honorable, even glorious, way out of this—no sati, no funeral pyre to give oneself gorgeously over to. There is instead addiction, deterioration, despair, a slow death—or, if you choose, a fast one, which unleashes a whole other set of sorrows.

I mention all of this because these concerns are indeed relevant, are in fact quite pressing. I'm sorry to admit, though, that I don't mention all of this because I have any clear-cut solutions. But many books of theology and homiletics I've been reading lately suggest any preaching that presents problems that the preacher manages to solve within the fifteen minutes that most sermons span are either not dealing with the actual problems that people come to church with or are disingenuous in how they approach them or what solutions they offer. Really, too many sermons conclude with the assurance to congregants that Jesus is Lord and this is all we need to know.

And that's true, as far as it goes. I just don't think in the lives of most people it goes all that far. We don't need magical solutions nearly as much as we need a full airing of what problems plague us and, to be honest, might always plague us, that is until time comes to an end and the consummation of all creation occurs such that God is truly the all in all.

Meanwhile, we trust that God is at work in all things for good, and that we might participate in that work, for what else is there to do?

We'll eat, then, and drink, and be nourished—widows that we are, widows in need, but also prophets full of promise, each of us and all of us.

Thanks be to God.