

“A Different Perspective on Widows and Others in Need”

1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:38-44

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

November 11, 2018

Sometimes we do harm when we are trying to do good. In another setting where I served, an older men’s Sunday School Class had a couple of traditions at their annual Christmas party that we at first cringed at and eventually were able to convince the class to change.

The first tradition was to pass out raffle tickets to the women who were invited - wives of class members, widows of former members and the preacher’s wife. The tickets were for a ham which was innocent enough, but women kept looking at Dana, shaking their heads and whispering, “Don’t take one.” What could be the problem with taking a ticket? We soon found out – the woman who had the winning ticket won the *prize* of preparing ham biscuits for the men the next Sunday!

The second tradition was to recognize and honor the widows who were in attendance. And unlike the first tradition, I think this was intended as a kind gesture. But the way it was done at this time of year only served to intensify the widows’ experience of loss and make them feel awkward. To invite them to the party was enough. We knew this because of the look on their faces and because they told us.

It was a sensitive matter, it took a few years, but we shifted the traditions and found a better way to honor the women. It seems obvious in retrospect, but sometimes we don’t have an accurate sense of the impact of our actions, and this applies to many acts of kindness extended to people with various needs. We start out meaning well but end up doing harm. There is no magic formula for how to avoid harm, but a good place to begin is by paying attention to the people we seek to help, listening to what they say about where they are and what they need.

We have read two stories today which provide helpful space to reflect upon the ways in which we view people in need. Both are about widows, both are familiar and both offer a different perspective on who widows are and by implication how we might view all in need.

In the first story, the prophet Elijah interacts with a widow in Zarephath in Sidon. He has prophesied to King Ahab that a drought is coming and sure enough a drought comes. God is not happy with Ahab because he has married Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, and built an altar in Samaria for people to worship Baal. 1 Kings 16:33 says Ahab does more to make God angry than all the kings before him.

So, Elijah says a drought will come and it does. God sends him to the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan River, where there is still water until the stream dries up. Then, God sends the prophet to Zarephath, in Sidon, where there is a widow God has commanded to help him. It is an odd request, to seek help from the enemy, but Elijah goes, and as we know, he finds the widow and she eventually helps him. We'll get to the details, but for now note that the prophet is helped by a foreign widow.

In the second story, Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the scribes who parade about wearing fancy robes, demanding special attention and offering long prayers which are designed to display their great wisdom. There is nothing that upsets Jesus more than hypocrisy. So, he lets them have it! Then, he continues his critique of institutional religion by watching rich people put big sums of money in the offering plate, in a way that others will notice, and then commenting that a widow who puts in two copper coins puts in more than the rich because they have given out of abundance while she has given all she has.

We are accustomed to talking about this widow during stewardship emphases. She is a noble example of sacrificial giving which we warmly embrace. But the first hearers of Jesus' claim have a different reaction. He is not just lifting her up, he is putting them down.

So, what do we make of these two stories about widows? What do we learn about them and all in need? And what do we learn about how we might extend kindness and compassion in a better way?

One thing that jumps out at me is that both of these women refuse to play the role of victim. They live in times when widows are vulnerable and thus often listed with orphans among those for whom God and God's people have a special concern. This perspective is found in the words of Psalm 146 with which we began worship – *the*

Lord watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow... (v.9) Widows are vulnerable, but neither of these widows will allow this part of her identity to define her.

To be sure, the widow in Zarephath reveals a woeful attitude. When the prophet asks for help, first water and then a morsel of bread, she says she only has a handful of meal left and a little oil. She is gathering sticks to prepare one last meal for herself and her son so they may eat it and die. That sounds like victim language, a woe-is-me attitude, some ancient female Eeyore.

But she has reason to feel hopeless. The drought is severe, she is a widow and she has no help. Levirate marriage does exist, the tradition of a kinsman looking after a widow, but the primary concern is the continuation of the deceased man's line. This woman already has a son. Thus, there is no help in sight. But even though she has reason to give up hope, she does what the prophet says and prepares a meal, and his promise of a miracle where the food and oil last comes true.

After our reading concludes, when her son becomes ill and nearly dies, she confronts the prophet, blaming him for her son's demise. It takes some hutzpah, but she lets him have it, and the prophet is moved to seek God's help and the son lives. This is a desperate woman, a woman who confronts death due to a drought and nearly loses her son. She is vulnerable and in need, but she does not play the role of victim.

Rather she displays strength and perseverance, she takes initiative when it is required, she acts in ways that enable her to keep moving forward one step at a time until authentic hope appears. She fixes a meal, even though she thinks it will be her last. She honors the prophet's requests, though they seem unfair. She fights for her son's life every way she can.

We don't know as much about the widow in the story from Mark, other than that she is poor, but she too refuses to play the role of victim. She offers what she has, indeed all she has, to further God's work and Jesus says her contributions matter more than those of the rich.

Now, he obviously hasn't had to chair a finance committee and worry about the bottom line... but he is not talking about mattering for the temple budget as much as mattering to God. This woman's

sacrificial gifts mean more to God because they have cost her more. It is an important corrective to much thinking about stewardship. We may be able to measure gifts in terms of dollars and cents; in fact, we have to; but only God knows the true value of any gift.

This woman is not a victim. She could choose to bury her last two coins, to withdraw from the community, to give up on life and faith, but she does not. She shows up at the temple and contributes what she can.

There are a couple of messages for us here, the first being a word of encouragement for us not to play the role of victim. We may have suffered much, we may have reason to lament some profound loss or clear wrong done to us or simply a run of bad luck, and there is a time and place for lamentation, but it is not healthy or productive to get stuck in the role of victim. Doing so gives more power to the people, circumstances and events that have dragged us down.

I think of two women in another setting who moved to a retirement home at the same time and had rooms right next to each other, but that is where their common ground ended. One woman held on to bitterness at the limits that had come in life, causing her to leave her home, and so she hated every day she was in that facility. She never participated in any activity, she hated the food and staff, she was miserable! The other woman was sad when she moved, but soon made up her mind to adjust. She participated in everything, loved the food and gave thanks to God for each day of life, prayed for her church and ministers daily.

Both women faced similar challenges. No dementia or significant mental health issue was involved. But one decided to remain a victim of ill fate while the other refused to get stuck there and thus continued to find meaning and joy. It is wise not to play the role of victim.

But the other message for us in this part of the story is a word of caution not to think of people in need strictly as victims. It is fine to extend compassion to people who have faced hardship – the loss of a loved one, marriage, home or job; the onset of physical or mental illness; the experience of poverty or violence or both. But to see someone only as a victim does them a disservice. It denies the presence of strength and resilience within them. And it tends to keep them in a place of need which we can continue to address and thus feel good about ourselves.

When our children fall, literally or figuratively, sometimes they need help, a hand in getting up, but sometimes they need space to get back on their feet themselves, to prove to themselves that they can. When someone struggles with an addiction or some other challenge, sometimes they need help. None of us makes it on our own. But at some point, they need to take their own initiative. There are some things no one else can do for us, some things we must do for ourselves.

Both widows in our readings refuse to play the role of victim. It is wise counsel for us personally and for the way we view people in need.

Another thing that jumps out at me in these stories is that both women reveal a depth of faith or courage or resilience, something more than desperation. The widow in Zarephath is desperate, but there is something more to her demeanor. The text says God commands her to feed Elijah. So, she has a personal interaction with God. She prefaces her statement about how little she has with the phrase, “As the Lord your God lives...” And when her son becomes ill, she goes to Elijah, not explicitly asking for help or assuming he can do anything, but she goes to him. She could have simply railed at God or the darkness in the night.

In like manner, the woman in the story from Mark demonstrates faith simply by showing up for worship and then she expresses deeper faith by placing her last two coins in the offering plate. We don't know that she expects anything in return. The text doesn't tell us much about her. But it seems to be a simple act of giving, surely shaped by past experience and a desire to prove faithful to God.

The message here for us is not just word of encouragement about the nature of faith, but a word of insight into the depth of faith many in great need reveal. We have a tendency to assume that those who are struggling have a deficit of faith. Either they struggle because they have too little faith or their faith erodes in the midst of struggle.

The latter is possible. We all have doubts and questions in the midst of suffering. Where was God when my mother died at forty-eight with a cerebral aneurysm? What difference does faith make if it can't help our loved ones? But many times, people in need reveal profound faith and this faith is a critical resource to help them through.

I think of wonderful people I have met on partnership mission trips to Kenya. All live with very little in terms of material resources. Many live on practically nothing, making simple items to sell out of rocks or sticks, growing what food they can. Nearly a million live in one Nairobi slum called Kibera in makeshift coverings. It is tempting to feel pity for people in such poverty. Surely they must have lost all hope and faith.

And yet, as anyone who has spent time in a third-world setting can attest, many reveal deep faith in the midst of their challenges. In fact, some feel closer to God each day because they know they are utterly dependent on God (which we all are, some of us just don't realize it) and most appreciate the simple joys of everyday life more than we do. This does not mean we should all seek out poverty nor that we should not help and empower those in need. It simply means we need to be careful about judging the faith of others because they have some need we don't.

It is wise not to view those who struggle simply as victims and it is wise to see the strength in all people, the courage and faith that is built into each of us. Perhaps most of all, it is wise to relate to all people, including widows and others in need, as people, human beings like us.

The book *Same Kind of Different as Me* tells the story how two men who were radically different became close friends. Ron was a wealthy arts dealer who grudgingly volunteered at an inner-city mission because his wife was involved there. Denver was a drifter with a troubled background who was in and out of homelessness. They also happened to be of different ethnicities.

At first, Ron saw all homeless people in a negative light, then he came to have some appreciation for their experience and developed some willingness to help. In the end, he saw Denver as human being and Denver got past his negative assumptions about Ron and the two developed a kind of friendship that transcended their differences. When Ron's wife, the woman whose Christian love changed both of these men, died, Denver was the person who brought him the greatest comfort.

That is a different perspective on people in need. We are all people, we are all in need, and we can all help each other, just like the prophet Elijah and the widow in Zarephath did.