

Sunday October 9, 2022
Lesson 6: Gifts of the Widows
Scripture: 1 Kings 17: 8-24; Luke 21: 1-4

Context:

This fall we continue our series titled “Freedom.” Our second unit is titled “Justice” and looks at scriptures where God advocates for those who are vulnerable and in need. The scriptures today include a passage from the Old Testament and a passage from the New Testament, both focusing on widows. Our purpose is to recognize how God values those society deems less worthy and expects us to act likewise.

Both texts today emphasize how widows are important to the story of God and why their examples should inspire us and remind us to include all people in ministry. In the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, God makes a point of being the giver of life and renewing souls. The story comes as a larger part of chapter seventeen, where the land is experiencing a drought and resources are at an all-time low.¹ Even still, God sends Elijah into a land where Baal is worshipped, and Elijah must find friendly faces amidst this proclaimed enemy of the Israelites. God sends him first to a widow with an upper room.

By all accounts, a widow with an additional room should be able to provide. Yet with a low harvest, even she finds herself in a dilemma. When Elijah comes to her, she is caught between the demands of ancient hospitality and the harsh reality of famine; she reacts with an oath and fatalistic resignation.² She will take what little she possesses and give to Elijah, and then resign herself to death.

Elijah tells her to fear not and gives instruction. From a little bread, the family is blessed to eat and thus they live. All is well for a time being.

Yet when the son becomes sick, the widow wonders if this is punishment for her sin. Elijah cries in agony over the son and pleads before God for his life. The son becomes well and the woman, a foreigner, proclaims Elijah to be a man of God. God is the prime mover in this narrative, on the side of life and giving faith to even those on the outside of a group.³ God shows the power of working through all people and through times of famine and distress.

In the story from the gospel of Luke, Jesus sees the rich people and a widow giving at the Temple. Instead of praising the wealthy for giving, Jesus points to the widow as the example for generosity and stewardship. This passage comes after examples of the disciples asking for greatness. Jesus points to the widow and makes a point on how true greatness comes in giving like a widow who gives what little she possesses to the kingdom of God.⁴ If the disciples want greatness, they must learn to give of everything of themselves.

¹ Nelson, Richard D. “First and Second Kings.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 112.

² Ibid., 110.

³ Ibid., 114.

⁴ Craddock, Fred. “Luke.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 242.

Application

Throughout scripture, there are various groups of people represented. Some are huge centers of focus such as prophets, priests, kings, and the apostles. One group which constantly reappears in lesser quantities is the group of widows, those whose husbands have died, and they are on their own. Yet this group continues to be a source of hope and inspiration as God also encourages people to see them as valuable and especially significant in God's eyes.

I could not help but think of how this element plays out in the church as well. Often in the church world, we also have groups of people we focus on such as the leaders, the clergy, young people, families with teens and kids, and the matriarchs and patriarchs. We hear various ministry plans seeking to address the needs of these people or trying to empower them. Numerous church studies and workshops focus on targeting these groups, especially when it comes to young people or families.

While it is certainly important to focus on these groups, I can tell you one group which often gets overlooked and yet the church could not exist without are the groups of widows who are faithful and sit in our pews day in and day out. They are the ones to pray for your children, to raise funds to repair the air conditioner, and to bless the clergy and the staff when pretty much everyone else seems mad and upset. Some might be more vocal than others, yet for the most part they are the group who demonstrate loyalty and fidelity even in the most trying of times.

Today's society might not deem widows as less worthy as much as it might forget or dismiss them because they are already there and present. Yet the scriptures remind us of how these people are so vital to the story of God. Their presence, not based on age or marital status, reminds us of the intrinsic value to each person as part of God's story.

One way to approach today's lesson would be to think about how we can affirm or build relationships with those who are often there, but we overlook because we know they'll be there tomorrow. In today's passage from the Old Testament, we see Elijah developing a connection to the widow, even staying at her home and being a part of her community. Perhaps we might look around and ask who the "widows" among us might be whether they are actual widows or people who are older or not married.

God could very well be asking us to see them not as projects or people to be nice to as we check off our good deeds list. God might be sending us them to help us grow in our faith journey or even think about how we could grow in ways we never would have on our own. Like the widows from today's scripture passage, God could ask us to look at them so we might grow as disciples of Jesus.

It might mean speaking to them and asking to hear their stories. Or it may behoove us to ask if there are ways we can help them. Sometimes it is coming to their group gatherings and simply listening to them, experiencing life alongside them. It might even mean asking them to be a witness to others, sharing their own faith journey to help others.

My own call to ministry came from the fruit of a relationship with a widow who had volunteered to be a confirmation mentor. Though she claimed to not know much, she knew about Jesus, and she told me stories about the ways he loved her and shown her the way to everlasting life. She shared with me the tenets of the Christian faith and how she saw God at work in my life. Because of her willingness to share her faith and her story, I learned to see God nudging me to see my place in the church and to say yes to following Jesus.

How do you think God sees people who are forgotten or dismissed because of their age, marital status, or gender? Why do you think God wants us to pay attention to all people and what they contribute to life? Who are the "widows" in your circles of faith? What are ways you might

empower or be in ministry beside those who are forgotten or dismissed? How might you appreciate those who never receive appreciation or love for what they contribute to the church or society?

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