

The Might of Widows
I Kings 17.8-16; Mark 12.38-44
Sunday, November 11, 2018
Pentecost +25 B
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Elijah must have been terribly disappointed. And by terribly disappointed I mean absolutely shattered and utterly devastated. He makes his way to Zarephath where, he's been assured, a widow will feed him. God has cared for him by the Kerith Ravine where ravens have brought him bread and meat while he drank from the river. But the river is now dry, and God sends word to find The Widow.

Elijah is one of the asylum seekers of scripture, forced migration because of devastating drought and certain death if he stays put. He's also one of the voices speaking out against empire, taking bold stances against kings, subverting the narrative around him being used by corrupt power to amass more power. It seems being on the run, in scripture, is linked to political powers who don't want certain people to live and don't care if certain other people die.

Now Elijah faces likely-if-not-certain death if he doesn't find some food quickly, and God assures him The Widow in Zarephath will take care of his hunger. I'm sure that instruction landed with Elijah in a way it didn't land with us. We know enough about the ancient world to hear "widow" and know there's not mistake to this instruction. Widows, of course, were vulnerable and more likely to be in need of care and assistance than to be the source of it.

But Elijah has been fed by ravens, twice daily, at the edge of a brook for some time. He has learned that God is capable of surprising forms of provision, and he goes to The Widow without question. He must be surely imagining a safe place to rest and a table overflowing with favorite foods.

Instead, he finds a woman so poor and so desperate that she is preparing a final meal before she and her son starve to death. He calls out to her, "Would you bring me a little water in a jar so I may have a drink?" As she was going to get it, he adds, "And bring me, please, a piece of bread." A starving man sent to the home of a starving woman, unaware inside waits a starving child.

This is where God sends Elijah.

Julie Claassens¹ comments, “At the brink of starvation, she discloses that she is actually busy preparing a last meal with the last few morsels of food left. After that she expects them to die from starvation.

As widow, this woman has known her share of misery. She has lost her husband and is struggling to care for her child. Together with the poor, foreigners and orphans, widows indeed could be characterized as persons whom Judith Butler describes as being in a state of precarity ‘in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death’ (*Frames of War*, 25).”

And yet, she adds, “it is exactly in situations of extreme need that God’s grace breaks in. God who provided Elijah with food by means of the unclean ravens in 1 Kings 17:4-6, now provides food to Elijah by first feeding the widow and her child.” Elijah’s provision will, by necessity, require provision for the woman and her son. The jar of flour was not used up, and the jug of oil did not run dry. It’s a miraculous feeding story and everyone lives!

Until illness strikes the house, and the son dies anyway—there was no breath left in him, we read. The Widow now knows the power of God, and she understands that Elijah has access to this power and has someone garnered the attention of the Divine in a unique and particular way. Rather than falling to the ground in a grieving posture, she speaks to Elijah from the depth of her belly, “FIX. THIS. You’re apparently a man of God and have somehow brought calamity here with you. Fix this now.” Elijah listens to her and knows she is right.

He takes the child, waving his own body over the child three times, something like a spirit hovering over the void at the edge of creation. He calls out to God to bring life back into the child, and the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah. As she sees her son enter the room, alive and well, The Widow testifies. She knows in her bones who Elijah is and who the Lord is and what Truth is.

Claassens notes, “The widow’s belief in a life-giving Deliverer God is clearly seen in the confession of the widow in 1 King 17:24: ‘Now I know that you are a man of God.’ The God who is proclaimed in this pericope is indeed a God who transforms despair and mourning into laughter and hope.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2860

But the widow's confession, 'You are a man of God,' also suggests that to actively work for ways in which to resist and counter those forces that impede life is to embody the work of God. So it is significant to keep in mind that Elijah himself is in an exceedingly desperate situation, fleeing for his life with no food and no shelter. Nevertheless, he is still able to act as God's hands and feet on earth when he, as well as the widow and her son who are in equally dire straits, end up caring for one another."

There is power in her words, but her words are backed up by her actions. To be a person of God, to be on the path of God, to be living into the ways of God means one must embody those words, that path, those ways. She strengthens Elijah with food but also with deep belief in his mission. The Widow tells the story of God back to him, shows him his connection to the Holy One, and demands he embody his own power. This lesson is critical before his next sojourn as God sends him to Ahab—rooted not just in the power of God but in the might of The Widow.

Holding that story in our imaginations as we turn to the gospel reading, Jesus and his disciples are in a lesson at the temple. Government and religion are intertwined in an unhealthy and unsavory way. Jesus is pointing out the faith leaders whose identities are tethered to the power of empire and not the heart of their faith. Not only do they want respect and the best seats, "They devour widows' houses" and then stand in public to pray long prayers. The words of their prayers are hollow because they do not embody the words they speak. Their path and their ways are empire and not Holy One. Their path and their ways are greed and myopia not generosity and compassion.

Jesus then draws their attention to a gesture the men in long robes would ignore—another century, another widow. Rich people around her can drop large sums into the treasury without feeling the weight of their gifts. The Widow comes in and gives a tiny portion of what the wealthy give, but it's all she had to live on. She has given out of everything she had.

Now I hear that story and know it has been abused by pastors who want more money in the offering plate. Thankfully, we've already passed through that part of the service today, so I won't risk manipulating the text for a larger draw. *shivers* These stories of Widows are about the testimonies they give with their lives. How are they internalizing the story of God and then living it out? How do they understand who God is and what God is about when the men around them, men who either have a unique tie to God's voice (as Elijah did) or get the public credit for being tied to God's favor (as the men in long robes did), miss the truth of who God is and what God is about? The Widows are telling the story by living it.

Karoline Lewis² writes, "I think this story tells a truth about God. God sees right through our self-attentive ways, our tendency for self-preservation, our constant leaning toward the lure of all that might build up the self, especially at the expense of those who need our help the most. We are not fooling anybody, especially God, if we think that any acts of philanthropy are truly extensions of the Kingdom of God if they don't remember where Jesus ended up.

The widow's 'inbetweenness' is that which Jesus sees -- caught in the middle of systems vying for power...[And in that inbetweenness, we discover] the widow's might is God's might -- a might known in love and loyalty. In giving and grace. And in dependence and dedication."

We know inbetweenness. Very few in this room have experienced the gripping fear of deep poverty or wondered how we'll manage to feed our children tonight. It is not appropriate for us to squeeze ourselves fully into either Widow's role in these stories. But we know inbetweenness. We know the pull of a cultural and political system that celebrates the voices of a few while ignoring the voices of millions. We know the way that pull has infiltrated our own faith tradition. We know how it feels to be caught in the middle of systems vying for power and not knowing where to turn for Truth, for solace, for hope. We know how it feels to want to make a mark for change, take a step of bravery, use our gifts and talents for the good of God's kingdom but sensing all the while they what we have is too small to offer.

The stories we hold in our hands today tell us that God is already plotting goodness in the least likely places. God is weaving our lives together to surprise us and expand our imaginations as we recognize where real power, real truth, real healing, real joy reside. The call of our faith is to embody it—take these words into our beings and live them out. May you know in your bones who you are, who the Lord is, what Truth is, and how you are called to live out of that awareness. May you become God's vehicles for making all things new right here in this old world. May you be rooted not just in the power of God but in the might of The Widow.

Amen.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5245>