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## *The Gift of Widows*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**

**Proper 27 – Year B**

*Jesus called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Mark 12:43-44*

I am about to break one of my principles of preaching. You have heard me mention it before, and it has to do with the hazardous question every sensitive preacher asks sooner or later. Should a wise preacher ever use his or her own family as examples in his sermons? Or: Should a preacher ever mention his friends or associates in extended sermon stories?

My principle is this: Always get the permission, first, of a person whom you intend to mention in a sermon! That has especially been my principle, and my promise, in my own family. I made my wife and children a promise, a long time ago, that I would never mention them in my sermons without asking their permission. That principle has served us both well.

(Wait a minute, though. I think I just mentioned them without telling them first!)

Well, every preacher might use the same sort of principle whenever he or she mentions anyone in a sermon. That is simply good and polite practice.

This morning, however, I want to preach about a particular group of people, and I have not really obtained their complete permission. It would be impossible, actually, to hear them speak with one voice. They are all individuals, and they each have distinctive opinions and experiences; but I want to speak about them as a category, a good and faithful category of people.

Sadly, they are often forgotten, and even ignored, in our day and time. If you watch any television, or follow any trendy social media outlet, you will hear a lot about the youthful new things, the daring new cultures, what the young people are doing. Or “the children,” we cry out! It is amazing how often we use children to bolster any political, or religious, argument we are making. “Think of the children,” we exclaim!

Well, I am glad we have so many vigorous children and youth in our church. We have amazing children and youth programs. But as wonderful as those young people are, and as faithful as their leaders are, children and youth are not the category of people I want to mention today.

Our lessons this morning are about widows. The story of Ruth, for instance, is very much a story about faithful widowhood, both young and old widowhood. And in the gospel, widows are mentioned twice – first as those whose houses are devoured by the haughty scribes demanding attention, and second in the story we know as “the widow’s mite,” when Jesus noticed a widow visiting the temple treasury and making an offering of everything, everything she had.

In the midst of our culture’s fascination with youth, it is good to pause today and reflect upon widows, who we might say represent the elderly in general. And when we say “widows,” we mustn’t forget those called “widowers,” either.

The Bible speaks highly for widows. Along with strangers, orphans, and the poor, they are accorded special and holy regard. Psalm 68:5 says, "Father of orphans and protector of widows, is God in his holy habitation." Deuteronomy 10:17-18 declares, "For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow."

Sometimes, it is the widow who stands for the position and the plight of Israel itself, especially insofar as Israel was lost and powerless in the world of empire. Widows were allowed to glean in the fields (as we noticed in the story of Ruth this morning) and to participate in the tithe and meals and public festivals.

Elijah and Elisha paid attention to a widow. And Jesus himself raises back to life the deceased son of a widow. In the gospel of Luke (chapter 2), it is the widow Anna who never leaves the temple, so constant is she in prayer and in expectation of the savior. Later on his gospel, Luke uses a widow as the example of persistent prayer (Luke 18:1-8).

In the Acts of the Apostles, widows seem to be considered a particular group. It is they who are cared for particularly by the new order of deacons (Acts 6). Finally, in the Book of James, the writer says that "religion that is pure and undefiled is...to care for widows and orphans in their distress" (James 1:27).

Some early church scholars think that widows were accorded not only status and privilege, but that they actually were a category of leader, with prescribed duties, especially the duty of prayer. Acts 9 describes a community of widows led by Dorcas. Some scholars think they were a particular order; just as deacons and priests were ordained and ordered, so were widows. In the third century, when particular roles were being documented in the church, widows were listed as enrolled alongside bishops, priests, and deacons. Wow. The special ordered role of the widow, throughout all these documents, was prayer.

In a way, then, the early Christian church recognizes that, not only do widows need the church, but the church needs widows. By extension, we need widowers, too. We need the elderly, those who have known both gain and loss. We need those who have known both abundance and poverty.

What, then, is a widow? We all know what the word means, literally. A widow, or a widower, is someone whose husband or wife has died. But that literal definition leads to something else. A widow, a widower, is someone who has lost a loved one. A widow, a widower, has lost a lover. Thus, widows stand faithfully in the church in the midst of loss. We might say that widows represent loss for us, the faithful Christian community, and we need the widow's faith.

Ah, how difficult it is for us to acknowledge loss. We would rather be looking for all the newest things we can acquire. We would rather go out to the shopping mall, or be buying new things for our business, or looking through our accumulating Christmas catalogs, or browsing the latest items on Amazon.com. We would prefer to be acquiring things, even if it's only an experience. It is said that our culture now values experiences; we are inwardly craving exciting experiences.

But the person of the widow goes against that craving. The widow shows us how to live without. Thus, God compels us to honor the widow, to pay attention to the widower. Jesus warns us to be careful not to ignore the widow.

So it is that Jesus points out this woman in today's gospel, Mark 8. He is observing all the faithful placing their gifts in the temple treasury. They are making their stewardship pledge to the church! They are surely all manner of faithful people, just as you and I try to be.

But then Jesus notices a widow, a widow who puts into the offering everything, everything she has, and he especially points her out. Everyone else, he says, has given out of their abundance. But, she, out of her poverty, has given everything she had (Mark 12:44).

This morning, I am not a widow, or a widower; and I did not seek the counsel or permission of widows and widowers to focus on their plight in this sermon. I do not mean to embarrass or exploit their identity in my reflections this morning.

But I do want to honor what that role means. The Church needs widows and widowers because they show us how to be faithful in the midst of loss. They show us how to pray. They show the Church how to give. They show the Church what it means to give, not out of abundance, but out of poverty. Widows show the Church what it means to give it all. The gift of widows in the Church is the gift of love.

AMEN.

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