**“Widows’ Houses”** by S. Finlan, at The First Church, November 7, 2021

**Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17**

[Both Ruth and Naomi were widows.] Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. 3Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” 5She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do”. . .

4:13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him”. . . 17They named the boy Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

**Mark 12:38–44**

38As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, 39and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43Then he 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. 44For 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.”

There are really three texts here, since the gospel passage splits into two texts. What is common between all three is the theme of widows. There is a Moabite widow, Ruth, who refuses to leave the side of her Israelite mother-in-law, the widow Naomi. Then there is the Jesus saying about the scribes devouring widows’ houses, and finally the incident where Jesus draws attention to and exalts a widow putting money in the temple treasury. Widows were among the most vulnerable people in those societies. They had no man to represent them in court or to fight for their rights in any other way.

Let’s look at these three passages. Let’s start with Naomi. She moved from Judah to Moab during a time of famine in Judah. While there, she bore two sons to her husband, and they both married Moabite women. Naomi’s husband died. A few years later, both of her sons died. Naomi decides to move back to Judah, and she takes her family, the two Moabite daughters-in-law, with her. Before long she decides to stop and tells the two young women that they should go back to Moab and find husbands for themselves. One daughter does, but Ruth refuses to leave, saying “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (1:15). So they continue on into Judah, and Naomi decides to settle near the land owned by Boaz, a relative of her deceased husband. There Ruth gets a job working in Boaz’s fields. Boaz is kind to her and makes sure none of the men bother her. Boaz is a decent and respectful guy. After this is when Naomi decides to play matchmaker, and it works out! Boaz and Ruth get married. What Naomi does is very bold, but everything comes to a happy end.

In fact it’s a happily-ever-after story, since Ruth bears a boy who will become the grandfather of King David. Ruth is a story about a Gentile who, drawn by deep friendship, joins and assimilates to the Jewish people.

An equivalent story today might be a mixed marriage, where one partner agrees to change religions. Of course, that means changing a whole culture and a whole approach to life, as well as beliefs about God.

When we come to the first Jesus text, we see that he attacks the scribes for always seeking the place of honor, but meanwhile they are confiscating widows’ houses. Jesus will speak out about severe economic injustice, although it is not the dominant theme of his preaching. The confiscation is part of the process called latifundia, which has been going on for centuries in Judah, where the urban and powerful impose heavy taxes on small homes and farms, and confiscate the land when the poor are unable to pay the taxes. Jesus’ attack is like Isaiah’s on “you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you” (5:8), or Micah’s accusation: “The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory” (2:9). Evidently some of the scribes were part of the circle of rich and powerful in Jerusalem who were able to impose these taxes and penalties. Jesus is like a Hebrew prophet when he defends the poor and the powerless. Notice that he is offended by the loss of “glory” or respect that the victims suffer. Jesus is a strong believer in letting people have normal self-respect. To steal their homes is also to steal their self-respect. Jesus would restore glory to the meek; everybody needs some glory, some pride.

Jesus noticed when people weren’t receiving any respect. He certainly noticed it about Zacchaeus, the tax collector in Jericho. When Jesus was arriving in Jericho, Zacchaeus, who was short, ran ahead and climbed a tree, so that he would be able to see Jesus. When Jesus approached his tree, he said “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). That’s fine, but the people grumbled “and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner’” (19:7). Zacchaeus hardly noticed them, but he was greatly moved by Jesus’ respect, and he promised to give half his money to the poor and to pay back fourfold anyone whom he might have overcharged. Jesus said “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” (19:9). He affirmed this guy who was despised by his neighbors. He gave him the best compliment possible, “son of Abraham,” helping to restore the fellow’s self-respect.

The next text in today’s reading is Jesus’ saying exalting the devotion of the widow who was poor but who gave all she had to the temple treasury. Her humility and devotion put everyone else to shame. He is honoring unselfish giving, and unpretentious generosity. He is also, in both of those sayings, standing up for people who are frequently looked down upon or taken advantage of. These are examples of “blessed are the meek” (Matt 5:5). Jesus is the defender of the meek and despised.

I’m sure there are many examples we could find in our day of people who deserve praise, whether it is someone contributing to the church or doing acts of charity for the poor, or teaching neighborhood kids how to play baseball. There are many worthy acts of kindness and devotion that we can admire.

Jesus’ defense of widows and other vulnerable people was noticeable. He would allow the meek to have an ordinary amount of glory. And he wants people to be able to dwell in their pleasant houses. Jesus supports the ordinary joys of living, and he has a healthy revulsion against exploitation, cruelty, and hateful snobbery. As the Son of Man, he feels what ordinary healthy people feel when they see injustice. As the Son of God, he defends the vulnerable and the wounded against all attacks, including attacks by religious bullies who know how to make others feel unworthy.

What a friend we have in Jesus. Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows share? And dissolve them, too. He will stop at nothing to restore self-respect to those who desire to regain it. He respects all the widows and orphans, the Gentiles, the lepers, the children. We should never be discouraged. Take it to the Lord in prayer.