### “Many Widows” Steve Finlan for The First Church, February 2, 2025

**Hebrews 2:14–18**

14Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. 18Because he was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**Luke 4:21–30**

21Then he said to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” 22All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” 23He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here in your home town the things that you did at Capernaum.’ ” 24And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. 25But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three and a half years, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Good morning to everyone. It’s the start of a new month, and we are now halfway to the beginning of spring. That’s better than saying we’re in the depth of winter.

In one of our Bible readings we see the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Last week we read about Jesus introducing his ministry by reading a prophecy to his Nazareth townsfolk from Isaiah about the Spirit being upon someone who brings healing, release from captivity, and sight to the blind, and finishing by saying that this was now fulfilled in their hearing. Here we see what follows. The Nazarenes want him to perform signs for them, and his answer is to give two Old Testament stories where no miracles were done during a certain period except the miraculous feeding of a Sidonite widow and the miraculous healing of her son by Elijah, and then the healing of a Syrian leper by Elisha. He draws attention to God’s choice of certain Gentiles instead of Jews: “There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah . . . yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon” (Luke 4:25–26).

Although these stories are from the Jewish Scriptures, the Nazarenes take offense because it concerns the healing of two foreigners, and not of any Israelites. The notion that God might care as much for Phoenicians and Syrians as he does for Israelites, was extraordinarily offensive to these proud nationalists. Anyone who thinks himself a Christian nationalist today ought to ponder the fact that Jesus went out of his way to point out to the nationalists of his own day God’s goodness to *all* people. He was trying to open their eyes to the fact that we all come from the Father, that we all ought to be brothers and sisters in God’s family.

Right at the commencement of his public ministry, Jesus made sure to let people know that God was showing no favoritism to Israel. With this reply, Jesus is saying that God will show favor to whoever shows faith. When the woman saw that Elijah had healed her son, she said “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth” (1 Kings 17:24). Elijah’s kindness to a Phoenician boy was proof of the truth of his teaching. In the other story, Elisha’s kindness was proof of the reality of God.

For many people, but not for these people of Nazareth, Jesus’ acts of kindness were proof of the truth of his status as prophet and Messiah. These Nazarenes were ready to kill him. But it was not his time, and he simply turned and walked out “through the midst of them” (Luke 4:30). There must have been something about his commanding presence that hindered them from forcing him into something for which his time had not yet come.

Jesus speaks like a prophet to them, and he nearly suffers the fate that some of the prophets suffered. Tradition says that Amos offended the nationalism of Israel when he said “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord” (Amos 9:7), and Amos was killed by the chief priest and his son (*Lives of the Prophets* 7:1). Isaiah and Ezekiel were also said to have been killed (*Lives of the Prophets* 1:1; 3:20). It takes courage to speak truth to power. It is risky to challenge the orthodoxy and the power structure of one’s day, and to try to move people toward a deeper knowledge of God. Jesus definitely moved people to get them to open their eyes, to drop their prejudices, to shed their spiritual bondage and fears, and to re-dedicate themselves to God.

He did develop a large following, but we see he also earned himself some enemies right from the beginning. Again, let’s lay out what it was that offended the Nazarenes: Jesus wouldn’t cooperate with their request to work wonders, and he gave examples of non-Israelites being healed while Israelites were *not* being healed. These were his offenses.

What can we learn from this? First, that God does not respond to requests for spiritual spectacles and wonders. The desire to be entertained does not rise to the level of spiritual worthiness. Second, that God will save people of all nations. Jesus not only healed Gentiles, but there were several occasions when he went out of his way to uplift the Gentile and to even offend stubborn Jewish pride. Of a Roman soldier he said “I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matt 8:10 NIV).

We have to be ready to acknowledge the great faith of people of other nationalities. I have recently had occasion to preach, via Facebook, to some Pakistani Christians. They are poor, yet they are ready to give thanks every day for the salvation they have found. I have to simplify my words and wait while a translator renders it in their language, but they show gratitude in their faces when they hear my message, the same message I am giving to you on Sundays. I am learning and growing by interacting with that congregation. There are many widows in Pakistan, and some of them are gratefully receiving the good news. It is also fun to see all the children gathered for the service!

God can work with a receptive heart. He can plant his seed there, water it, and get it to grow. I give thanks for the seeds of faith growing around the world, and for the faith growing here in West Bridgewater, too. I give thanks that he took on flesh and blood, to live a human life, so that he could fully understand what we humans experience. Let us give thanks for the word being fulfilled in our hearing, for the good sprouts blossoming here in our sight. God is the gardener; we are his plants. The kingdom is his garden, and it will bear fruit forever.

Feel the spiritual joy, and share the abundance of God’s peace and love with those you will meet this week. Be ready to receive the living waters.