

November 11, 2018

PROPER 27B

1 Kings 17:8-16; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

IN TODAY'S READINGS WE HEAR TWO STORIES ABOUT WIDOWS.

IN THE ANCIENT DAYS OF THE BIBLE, WIDOWS HAD VERY DIFFICULT LIVES.

WITH THE DEATH OF THEIR HUSBANDS, WIVES LOST THEIR MEANS OF

SUPPORT AND THEIR STATUS IN SOCIETY. IT BECAME THE SON'S

RESPONSIBILITY TO CARE FOR A WIDOWED MOTHER, BUT WITHOUT AN ADULT

SON, MANY WERE LEFT HOMELESS AND HAD TO BEG FOR A LIVING FOR

THEMSELVES AND THEIR CHILDREN. IF WE CONSIDER THE BROAD BIBLICAL

NARRATIVE, THESE STORIES WE HEARD TODAY ARE RATHER IRONIC.

THEY TURN THE NORMAL WAY OF THINGS UPSIDE DOWN – BUT THEN THE

BIBLE DOES THAT A LOT. THROUGHOUT THE BIBLE THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE

ADMONISHED TO CARE FOR THE WIDOWS BECAUSE THEY ARE ESPECIALLY

VULNERABLE. AND YET IN THESE STORIES IT IS THE TWO WIDOWS, THE

LEAST ABLE, WHO GIVE BEYOND WHAT WE WOULD REASONABLY EXPECT. IN

THE FIRST STORY THE WIDOW OF ZAREPHATH IS PREPARING WHAT SHE

BELIEVES TO BE THE LAST MEAL THAT SHE AND HER SON WILL EAT BECAUSE

HER RESOURCES ARE DEPLETED. IN THE MIDST OF HER DESPERATION,

ELIJAH, A STRANGER AND A FOREIGNER, SHOWS UP AND ASKS HER FOR

FOOD AND DRINK. IN SPITE OF FEELING HOPELESS AND DEFEATED SHE

EXTENDS HOSPITALITY TO HIM GIVING HIM HER LAST MORSEL OF FOOD.

WITHOUT FOOD, SHE AND HER SON ARE DESTINED TO WASTE AWAY AND DIE.

SHE IS "ALL IN" PUTTING HER TRUST IN THIS FOREIGNER AND HIS GOD. SHE TAKES A HUGE RISK AND AS A RESULT GOD FEEDS HER ENTIRE HOUSEHOLD FOR DAYS. IN OUR SECOND STORY, WE DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO THE WIDOW AFTER SHE GIVES HER ALL TO THE TEMPLE. DOES SHE GO OFF TO DIE BY HERSELF OR DOES HER NEED TOUCH THE HEARTS OF THOSE WITH RESOURCES TO HELP HER? WE DON'T KNOW. WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THAT ON THAT DAY JESUS NOTICES THIS WIDOW, NOT BECAUSE OF THE AMOUNT SHE GIVES, BUT BECAUSE SHE GIVES ALL SHE HAS – 100%. SHE IS "ALL IN." JESUS TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO THIS WOMAN, THIS POOR NAMELESS WIDOW WHO PUTS THE ONLY MONEY SHE HAS IN THE TEMPLE OFFERING. SHE CAME TO THE TEMPLE WITH ALL THE OTHERS WHO WERE THERE FULFILLING THEIR OBLIGATIONS. AMONG THEM WERE THE FAITHFUL, DEPENDABLE WORSHIPERS WHO WERE CONSCIENTIOUS ABOUT FULFILLING THE LAW. THEY BROUGHT THEIR TITHE, THEIR TEN PERCENT AS THE LAW PRESCRIBES. GOD ASKS FOR THE FIRST FRUITS, THE FIRST TENTH AND THAT IS WHAT THEY GIVE – NO IF'S, ANDS, OR BUTS ABOUT IT, TEN PERCENT RIGHT OFF THE TOP. BUT THE WIDOW IN GIVING HER TWO SMALL COINS GIVES MORE THAN ALL THE REST BECAUSE HER GIFT IS COSTLY. IT COSTS HER EVERYTHING SHE HAS. SHE DOESN'T GIVE FROM HER ABUNDANCE. SHE GIVES SACRIFICIALLY. ON THAT DAY IN THE TEMPLE THERE ARE RICH PEOPLE, PUTTING IN LARGE SUMS OF MONEY OUT OF THE ABUNDANCE OF THEIR WEALTH. BUT JESUS LOOKS AT THE WIDOW – THIS ONE WHO IS USUALLY CONSIDERED INSIGNIFICANT AND TREATED AS THOUGH SHE IS INVISIBLE. JESUS SEES HER

AND KNOWS HER HEART. THIS WOMAN STANDS IN SHARP CONTRAST TO THOSE SCRIBES AND RELIGIOUS LEADERS THAT JESUS HAS JUST CRITICIZED WITH SCATHING WORDS DESCRIBING THEM AS THOSE WHO DEVOUR THE HOUSES OF WIDOWS. JESUS HOLDS UP THIS NAMELESS WIDOW AS AN EXAMPLE AND SAYS, "LOOK AT HER, THIS IS WHAT DISCIPLESHIP IS ALL ABOUT." IN HER GIVING SHE IS A FORESHADOWING OF THE SELF-GIVING OF JESUS WHO IS ON HIS WAY TO THE CROSS. SOON AFTER THIS ENCOUNTER, JESUS WILL LAY DOWN HIS LIFE, GIVING US ALL THAT HE HAS. SO THESE TWO WIDOWS BOTH MAKE PERSONAL SACRIFICES IN ORDER TO GIVE. WE MIGHT WONDER WHAT PROMPTS THEM TO DO THIS. ACCORDING TO EVELYN UNDERHILL, MOST OF US ARE CONTENT WITH LIVING ON THE SURFACE OF LIFE. BUT SOME OF US ARE MORE SENSITIVE TO THE HIDDEN DEPTHS OF SPIRITUAL FORCES THAT ARE AT WORK IN OUR LIVES, UNDER THE SURFACE WAITING TO BE DISCOVERED. WHEN WE REALIZE THAT THE SPIRIT OF GOD INFUSES ALL OF LIFE, WE ARE ABLE TO LIVE LIFE IN ITS FULLNESS AND RECOGNIZE THAT THE MEANING OF OUR LIVES IS BOUND UP WITH THE MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE. WE REALIZE THAT WE ARE PART OF A WHOLE THAT IS SO MUCH MORE THAN OUR OWN INDIVIDUAL LIVES. WHEN WE CONSIDER OUR LIVES FROM THIS POINT OF VIEW, WE ARE CAPABLE OF DEVOTION AND COURAGE AND HAVE A CAPACITY FOR LOVE AND SUFFERING THAT KNOWS NO BOUNDS. THIS, I THINK, IS WHAT PROMPTS PEOPLE LIKE SHERIFF'S SGT. RON HELUS TO RUN INTO THE BORDERLINE

BAR IN THOUSAND OAKS, CALIFORNIA AND GIVE HIS LIFE TRYING TO STOP A SHOOTER WHO WAS ON A RAMPAGE. MILITARY VETERANS WHO HAVE RISKED THEIR LIVES IN BATTLE, UNDERSTAND THIS. THEY SUFFERED AND SERVED ON BEHALF OF OTHERS AND FOUGHT SO THAT THERE MIGHT BE PEACE AND FREEDOM IN OUR WORLD. AND SADLY, MANY CONTINUE TO SUFFER AFTER THEY RETURN HOME. THERE ARE PEOPLE IN OUR MIDST WHO BY THEIR LIVES ARE PUTTING THINGS RIGHT AND MENDING BROKENNESS, WHO HAVE GIVEN UP THE HUMAN TENDENCY TO PUT SELF FIRST IN ORDER TO SERVE THE NEEDS OF OTHERS. THOSE WHO WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD AND THOSE WHO PUT THEIR LIFE ON THE LINE FOR OTHERS DO SO BECAUSE THEY ARE CAUGHT UP IN SOMETHING LARGER THAN THEIR OWN LIVES. THEY ARE EACH ONE STRAND IN THE WEB OF HUMAN LIFE EACH DOING THEIR PART TO MEND THE WHOLE. THIS, I THINK, IS WHAT PROMPTED THE WOMEN IN TODAY'S LESSONS. THEY WERE CAUGHT UP IN SOMETHING LARGER THAN THEIR OWN LIVES. THEY WERE RESPONDING TO GOD IN WHOM WE LIVE AND MOVE AND HAVE OUR BEING, AND IN DOING SO, THEY FOUND MEANING – A SENSE OF FOCUS AND DIRECTION – FOR THEIR LIVES. ALL TOO OFTEN, WE ARE TEMPTED TO SPEND OUR LIVES FOCUSING ON THREE VERBS: TO WANT, TO HAVE, AND TO DO. GRASPING AFTER, WORRYING ABOUT, AND CLINGING TO THE THINGS OF THIS WORLD – I CALL THEM THE 4 Ps -- POWER, PRESTIGE, POPULARITY, AND POSSESSIONS. STRIVING AFTER THESE, WE KEEP OURSELVES IN PERPETUAL UNREST AND DIS-EASE. WE ARE UNABLE TO PUT THINGS INTO A PROPER PERSPECTIVE IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF

THINGS. HAVING LOST OUR HOLD ON THE ETERNAL, WE FACE THE FUTURE WITH APPREHENSION. WE FORGET THAT ULTIMATE SIGNIFICANCE IS FOUND IN THE VERB TO BE AND THAT BEING, NOT WANTING, HAVING, AND DOING, IS THE ESSENCE OF LIFE. WE FORGET WHO WE ARE AND TO WHOM WE BELONG. WE FORGET WHERE WE CAME FROM AND WHERE WE ARE GOING. WE FORGET TO REALLY SEE OTHERS AS CHILDREN OF GOD, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE ON THE MARGINS OF SOCIETY AND THOSE WHO ARE "NOT US," HOWEVER WE DEFINE "NOT US." ON THE OTHER HAND, THE SURE AND CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE THAT WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN, GOD'S HEIRS, HELPS US LIVE WITH HOPE AND COURAGE IN BRINGING ABOUT GOD'S DREAM OF LOVE AND GRACE AND PEACE FOR ALL OF CREATION. A SURE HOLD ON THE ETERNAL GIVES LIFE HERE AND NOW MEANING AND DIRECTION AND HELPS US BECOME WHOLE AND BRING WHOLENESS TO OTHERS. THIS IS NOT AN ESCAPE FROM OUR PROBLEMS OR A DENIAL OF THEIR EXISTENCE. RATHER IT IS AN ACCEPTANCE OF THE REALITY IN WHICH WE FIND OURSELVES, WITH ALL OF ITS DEMANDS, AND THE GRACE TO LIVE IT OUT IN LIGHT OF THE ETERNAL. THEN EVERYTHING WE DO – EXTENDING HOSPITALITY TO THOSE IN NEED, TENDING A SICK CHILD, CARING FOR AN ELDERLY PARENT, GETTING UP AND GOING TO WORK OR SCHOOL DAY-AFTER-DAY, PARTAKING OF THE SACRAMENTS, CONTRIBUTING TO THE MINISTRIES OF THE CHURCH – FROM THE MOST MUNDANE TO THE MOST GLORIOUS – COMES FROM THE CENTER, WHERE WE ARE ANCHORED IN GOD. GOD WANTS OUR VERY SELVES – IN OUR RICHNESS AND IN OUR POVERTY, IN

OUR JOYS AND TRIUMPHS, WITH OUR STRENGTHS AND GIFTS AND TALENTS, AND IN OUR PAIN AND STRUGGLE, WITH OUR FEARS AND DOUBTS AND WEAKNESS. GOD WANTS THE TOTALITY OF OUR BEINGS SO OUR LIVES ARE PERMEATED WITH A SENSE OF DIVINE PRESENCE – A LIFE SOAKED THROUGH AND THROUGH – MARINATED – WITH A SENSE OF GOD’S REALITY AND CLAIM ON OUR LIVES. GOD WANTS TO BE PART OF EVERY DECISION WE MAKE – WHERE WE WORK, WHERE WE LIVE, WHO WE CHOOSE FOR FRIENDS, WHAT WE DO WITH OUR TIME, HOW WE SPEND OUR MONEY. GOD WANTS NOT JUST OUR BEST, BUT THE MEDIOCRE AND EVEN OUR WORST. GOD WANTS IT ALL – THE TOTALITY OF OUR LIVES. GOD WANTS US TO BE “ALL IN.” IN JESUS CHRIST WE SEE WHAT GOD IS UP TO IN OUR WORLD. IN HIM WE GET GLIMPSES OF A WORLD MENDED AND HEALED AND LIVES WOVEN TOGETHER INTO A COMPLEX AND INTRICATE WEB OF LIFE. WHEN WE LIVE ACCORDING TO GOD’S INTENTION FOR US AND ALL OF CREATION WE WILL FIND MEANING AND PURPOSE. THE UPS AND DOWNS, DESIRES, AND EFFORTS OF OUR LIVES ARE SEEN IN PERSPECTIVE – AS SMALL BITS AND PIECES WOVEN INTO A VAST AND ETERNAL WHOLENESS, ILLUMINED BY THE STEADY LIGHT OF CHRIST ABIDING WITHIN US AND ALL OF CREATION.