

Rachel Weeping

sermon digest

February 13, 2011

Mark 12:28-34, 38-44

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We've met her here before. Only usually in the Fall when we are doing our stewardship campaign. This poor widow, who "out of her poverty has put [into the temple treasury] everything she had, all she had to live on"] serves as a great model of sacrificial giving. We like to hold her up as an example of faithfulness. We like to think of ourselves, or at least challenge ourselves, to be more like her than like the rich people who gave great sums, but who, in the words of Jesus, gave easily, out of their abundance.

I encountered a different interpretation recently. It was one of those "aha" moments of "why haven't I seen that before?" Rather than turning the widow into the patron saint of stewardship Sunday, Andre Resner suggests we would do better to interpret who she is in terms of the familiar biblical personality type of the widow. Certain words in Scripture, he explains, are "root metaphors which carry [a] surplus of meaning." Every time we encounter them, they should spur us to recall a basic concept, the central concern and purpose for which they are used in Scripture again and again. The word "widow" is one of those words. Wherever it occurs, the "astute reader" will recognize something more than a solitary figure in time. The widow, like her companion the orphan, will trigger recognition of her "special place in God's heart and sense of justice. The law and the prophets both relentlessly thunder God's concern" for the widow and the orphan as those who represent "all those in any societal situation who are the most vulnerable, who have the least power and resources" [*Living Pulpit*, Ap-Jn, 2003, 6].

Think back to Jesus' reprimand of the scribes just prior to the point where he calls attention to the widow's placing her offering in the temple treasury. The scribes, Jesus says, walk around in fine robes. They enjoy the best seats in the synagogue and at banquets. Yet, "they devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers" (12:36-38).

"Well, that's the way it was with first century Judaism," we're prone to say. "That's why Jesus came, to straighten it all out." Notice, however, that Jesus has previously interpreted the whole law as being summed up in the commandments to love God and neighbor—an interpretation encountered repeatedly within Judaism itself. Notice that a scribe just before this story has affirmed and reinforced Jesus' words, to which Jesus has responded, "you are not far from the kingdom of God" (28-34). If we make Jesus' encounter with the widow in the Temple about the shortcomings of first century Judaism, we have seriously stereotyped the Jewish faith and we have even more seriously missed the point. Rather than piously identifying ourselves with the poor widow and telling ourselves we ought to give a little more, Western Christians in the current world situation would do well to put ourselves in the company of the well-to-do scribes and ask ourselves what is Jesus saying to us?

"Jesus' words here are not praise," Resner assures us, "they are lament." "The religious and political leaders' charge was to protect, defend, and support the widow and orphan, not rob them blind." Apparently, not only had the religious leaders of Jesus' day failed to abide by the law's dictates that widows were not required to give to the temple at all, they had also failed to take seriously the law's insistence that widows were to be sustained by the tithing of others (Deut 26:12-13; James 1:27). If they had fulfilled their responsibility to the widow, they would have worked "work a kind of justice in their leadership and preaching which would reverse the conditions and effects of poverty and loneliness that plague widows." To put it more personally, if *we the church of Jesus Christ* would fulfill our responsibility to the widow, the orphan, the stranger, we would work a kind of justice in our leadership and preaching that would reverse the poverty and loneliness that so isolate and injure them.

We as Christ's church are called to evaluate our priorities, our programs, our budgets and buildings in light of the plight of the widow, the orphan, the immigrant and the poor. Maria Teresa Palmer recalls the nine years she served as pastor of a mission church consisting primarily of transient and poor-immigrant members. The denominational expectation, she observes, is that a church become self-supporting; and yet, she recalls with a sense of sadness the struggles of her congregation. On any Sunday morning, not more than maybe half a dozen could be called upon to read. Some needed glasses—a luxury for the poor; some were illiterate or lacked self confidence. One man stayed near the back door "in case immigration police come." "Most felt inadequate and

undeserving. These worshipers brought little that the various denominations can quantify in reports” [Christian Century, O 31, 2006].

Palmer recalls with sympathy a fellow pastor, ministering to battered women and children in a shelter, telling her that she “doctored” her reports to the denomination by including as offering her own donations and honoraria she had received from speaking engagements. She didn’t want the viability of her church or her members’ faithfulness questioned. “She shields those who need the love of God,” Palmer observes. “She wants the offering reports to reflect what she and I know the worshipers are bringing: more than they can afford, given out of profound thankfulness to God.” Palmer goes on then to recall watching Helena, a modern day widow, placing a \$20 bill in the offering plate at the very moment when her family was having to sell its possessions to pay the ransom for her only son, imprisoned by guerrillas in Colombia.

I can imagine Jesus sitting on the sidelines with church leaders today watching that modern day widow place her \$20 bill in the offering plate. Can you see him, too? Can you imagine what he is saying to us? Can you imagine what he is asking of us? Can it be that if we view our church programs, buildings and budgets through his eyes that we, like the religious leaders of the first century would find ourselves and our own priorities challenged? Would our concern for “self-supporting churches” become more focused on ministry to communities and people in desperate need? Would our insistence on buildings built to communicate success and programs designed to attract the successful be sidelined by our concern that the elaborate nature of our buildings and programs not become a barrier to those in our community most in need of welcome? Could it be that our giving out of our abundance would be challenged to become abundant giving to those in society most desperately in need?

We as Christ’s church are called to work justice for the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, the poor in our world. An image playing a similar role in the Bible to that of the widow is the figure of Rachel, the matriarch of Israel who first wept for children and later died “in hard labor,” giving birth to her second child (Gen. 35:16-20). Buried in a wilderness area outside of Bethlehem, she is depicted in Jeremiah 31 and again in Matthew’s quote of Jeremiah in speaking of Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” Much like the widow, Rachel weeping has become a metaphor for not just the suffering of mothers, but the suffering of women through the centuries and world.

In the coming week congregations of varying religious persuasions will observe Rachel Sabbath—a day in which people of faith are called to reflect upon and respond to the suffering of women in our world. Timed to coincide with the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, a day observed as women worldwide began seeking equality, Rachel Sabbath is a time to pray and raise our voices on behalf of women and girls in every nation.

Lest we dismiss the concern as an empty exercise in political correctness, we should keep in mind the crises that afflict the real lives of women around the globe. Whereas in our experience in the West, gender discrimination usually signifies unequal pay or underfunded sports teams or unwanted touching (all important issues and issues which to which we as the church should firmly speak), in other parts of the world gender discrimination becomes *gendercide* as more than 2 million girls worldwide simply vanish into thin air. Writing in 1990, Nobel Prize-winning economist, Amartya Sen caught the world’s attention and spurred a whole new field of research when he concluded that worldwide “more than 100 million women are missing” [in Nicholas Kristof, *Half the Sky*, xv].

Recognizing the toll of discrimination—the deaths of baby girls in some cultures who do not receive medical treatment specifically because they are *girls*, not boys; the drastic differentiation in access to education, ownership of property and political and economic power; and the scourge of violence against women and girls represented in child marriage, bride burnings, honor killings, rape and domestic violence, Rachel Sabbath seeks to focus our attention specifically on the hardship encountered by women lacking access to effective family planning and those who die or are terribly maimed due to going through pregnancy and childbirth without access to medical care.

Although most deaths in childbirth could be eliminated with effective health care, consider the fact

that

- Every 90 seconds, somewhere in the world a woman dies from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth—approximately 343,000 women every year.
- Ninety-nine percent of pregnancy-related deaths occur in developing countries.
- Pregnancy is the leading cause of death for girls ages 15-19 worldwide.
- More than one million children are left motherless every year due to maternal deaths. These children are three to 10 times more likely to die within two years of their mother's death.
- Maternal mortality could be reduced by more than 70 percent by improved access to reproductive health services.

Rachel Sabbath is more than a day simply to feel bad. As a matter of fact, such tragic figures as those we have just noted are often enough to turn us off. We become depressed; we can't bear to think of the pain; and so we protectively close our ears, although we may still feel bad about it. To close ourselves off to the pain, however, is to close ourselves off to hope. The very books and resources that give us the bad news, give us the good news. There is so, so, so much that we can do. And it is happening. Entire communities and nations are taking steps to address the tragedy. From training and placing midwives in free clinics throughout rural areas to simply supplying prenatal vitamins and postnatal antibiotics, women's and infants lives are being saved.

Furthermore, the tired old argument of which is to blame—poverty or overpopulation—has been undercut by our experience in recent decades. Experience has dramatically demonstrated again and again women's desire for effective family planning services. Women are weary of bearing so many children for calamity; and they are weary of carrying one infant on their back while another grows in their belly. If the 215 million women worldwide currently lacking access to modern contraception had access, an estimated additional 53 million unintended pregnancies would be averted each year, resulting in 22 million fewer unplanned births, 25 million fewer induced abortions, and seven million fewer miscarriages. An additional 150,000 women's lives would be saved and 640,000 newborn deaths would be averted. Approximately 600,000 children would not lose their mothers. Whatever your political persuasion, I would say to you that support of global family planning services through our national budget is an act of deeply founded moral compassion.

So, say what you will, the faith that we proclaim in Jesus has broad social implications. Care for the widow in economic distress, care for the immigrant family trying to extend to their children a future of hope, and care for the millions of women and children around the world seemingly destitute of either economic sustenance and even a modicum of hope beckon us to hope and to pray and to work. Amen and amen. So let it be.