

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago, two different organizations made the news in the same day when they received large donations from the Joan B. Kroc Foundation. Joan’s husband Ray Kroc, who grew up in Oak Park, was the founder of McDonald’s. After Ray’s death in 1984, his widow Joan, turned her attention and energy to philanthropy. She helped open homeless shelters and hospice centers. She funded flood relief efforts in North Dakota, animal shelters in California, and peace institutes at Notre Dame and the University of San Diego. And after her death in 2003, both the Salvation Army and National Public Radio, among other organizations, received millions of dollars from her estate.

While they are both non-profits, the Salvation Army and NPR are two very different organizations. Their very mission statements illustrate their different goals:

- the Salvation Army’s mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination, and
- the mission of NPR is to create a more informed public – one challenged and invigorated by a deeper understanding and appreciation of events, ideas, and cultures.

The Salvation Army is known for its work with food distribution, clothing collection, preaching, teaching, and the rehabilitation of people who have lost themselves in addiction and poverty. National Public Radio brings coverage of local and world news and cultural events, and is responsible for such programs as *This American Life* and *The Prairie Home Companion*.¹

Both organizations contribute to American culture in different ways. One focuses on social services and evangelical outreach while the other is concerned with mostly secular education and artistic understanding. When we put these two side by side, their differences are more pronounced, more obvious. And while we might support both organizations like Joan Kroc did (indeed I think they both have valuable contributions to our society), we recognize their contrast more clearly in comparison.

In our gospel text this morning, the author of Mark recounts Jesus’ commentary on two distinct kinds of people. And the intent here in the gospel, unlike my comparison of these two non-profits, is to draw clear judgments upon the two.

Jesus warns against the scribes in long robes, who “devour widow’s houses.” Jesus praises the widow who gives out of her poverty. Hearing these two accounts together, reading these stories paired in Mark’s gospel, we recognize their contrast more clearly in comparison.

The scribes say long prayers for the sake of being heard. The scribes wear long robes for the sake of being seen. They put on airs in order to receive respect and honor. They demonstrate interest in the self.

The widow puts two copper coins, worth a penny, in the temple treasury, Mark reports. She gives so little, but she also would have had very little to give. She demonstrates, not interest in self like the scribes; she demonstrates interest in another.

Biblical emphasis on widows is not something unique to the gospel text this morning. And widows as we understand them today are very different from in Jesus’ time and before. Like Joan Kroc, widows were expected to make do for

¹ While aired on NPR, *A Prairie Home Companion* is produced by Prairie Home Productions, and distributed nationwide by American Public Media. *This American Life* is produced by Chicago Public Radio.

themselves without the support of their life partners. But unlike Joan, their lives would have been much more difficult in the patriarchal society of those times.

In those days, Widows were people with no means of support. They couldn't own property. They usually couldn't earn money. There were at the mercy of public compassion, living off handouts of their extended family or local community.

When her husband died, a widow could go back to her family, if they were willing to accept her. Otherwise she might stay with her husband's family, where she was usually given very low and humiliating jobs. She would become a burden.

The widow at Zarephath was lucky to have a son, although we don't know his age or ability to provide. The widow at the temple is described as poor, which is interesting since poverty would have been a typical and given characteristic of a widow. When Jesus describes her as such, it could be to draw greater contrast to those who were not poor or it could be just a rhetorical technique to stress her poverty.

Widows, such as these, were totally dependant on others. They had little to give or to share. When Elijah approaches the widow in Zarephath and requests a portion of her remaining sustenance, (I think that) she is right to object, "As the Lord your God lives," she says to Elijah, "I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die."

Elijah encourages her and proclaims to her the Lord's promise of provision. And so she shares with the prophet and they eat for many days.

Both of these widows give; they give out of their poverty. One brings her coins and the other shares her meal and oil.

Typically, the witness of these widows is used to encourage stewardship, to give of our selves and to share our wealth. Indeed, there is merit and wisdom to be gleaned from the generosity of these women.

The texts before us this morning don't tell us much about their motivation, though. We know they gave. The widow at Zarephath after Elijah's coaxing. The widow at the temple out of her poverty. We know the scribes motivation though, through Jesus' interpretation of it. The scribes were interested in themselves and in their reputations.

If we understand widows in the context out of which these texts come, there is great significance to their presence in our scriptures and in our lectionary. The insight, the wisdom of these widow texts is the insight, the wisdom of who God is. The wisdom of these widow texts is in God revealed. Jesus' interest in the poor widow and God's call to the widow at Zarephath reveal that God is a God of challenge, and God is a God of compassion.

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God challenges God's people to share out of interest for another. God calls God's people to tasks that sometimes seem impossible. God's compassion spills over in oil and in meal and in simple gifts. While scribe-like people worry about what they look like, God sees through the façade and provides out of great abundance.

The psalmist reminds us that God cares for the stranger, and God sustains the orphan and the widow. God's care and call, God's challenge and compassion are so expansive, including even those who society sees as forgotten and burdensome.

To the glory of God.

Sunday, November 8, 2009
23rd Sunday After Pentecost

Sermon Title: Widow Wisdom
Sermon Text: 1 Kings 17.8-16 & Mark 12. 38-44

Panel:

This Sunday, the psalmist reminds us who God is. God created heaven and earth and all therein. God is a God of justice and liberation. God cares for the stranger and sustains the widow and orphan. God will reign forever.

God's care for widows is reflected in two of the other readings prescribed for this day. In the Old Testament reading, God sends Elijah to the widow at Zarephath, and she questions her ability to stretch the little sustenance she has. Elijah encourages her to trust in the Lord's provision. She does as Elijah commands, God provides, and her family is fed. In the gospel, Jesus points to a widow as a model for faithful stewardship. While others bring large sums to the treasury, the widow brings an even larger sum in proportion to what she possesses.

"I will praise the Lord as long as I live," the psalmist proclaims. Looking to God's actions and the wisdom of the widows in today's texts, we too, as God's children, are called to praise the Lord in word and deed.