

“God of Widows and Orphans”

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Based upon Ruth 2:1-13; James 1:17-27

Last week we began considering the categories of people in the Bible that God has singled out for our special attention and care, with the category of the *gerim*, or the strangers and sojourners in our midst. As it so happens, this week’s Old Testament lesson is one of the most poignant and powerful stories about the *gerim* in the Bible, the story of Ruth and Naomi. Set during the time of the judges, when Israel was a tribal confederacy with God as its invisible ruler, the story begins with a family’s fleeing to a foreign country because of famine. Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons leave home in search of more security and food living as *gerim* in the neighboring country of Moab. But no sooner are they there, then the story takes a dark turn which makes it clear that it isn’t going to be a tale about finding redemption in a foreign land, at least not for Naomi. Her husband Elimelech dies. Then, although her sons and their wives take care of her for a while, her sons die too. So before we even get to Chapter Two, we are left with three women without husbands, brothers-in-law, or male heirs, three widows who are not only overcome with loss, they also must figure out quickly how to survive themselves.

Living as we do in a place and time where and when women and men have equal rights under the law, and the thought of any person being treated as property is anathema, it can be hard for us to appreciate fully the predicament that the three women found themselves in when their husbands died. But in those times, in Israel and many surrounding nations, women did not have independent status or rights. They were in most respects treated as chattel, living as their fathers’ property until they were their husbands’ property, until they were their sons’ property. Without a man to care for them, their very lives were endangered. They couldn’t go make a living for themselves, or even live off of their husband’s land, since they were not allowed to be property owners. If they couldn’t go back to their families of origin or find a man to marry them quickly, they didn’t really stand a chance. Many widows without male relatives died of hunger, as the famous widow of Zarephath in *1 Kings* would have if the prophet Elijah hadn’t come along. (*1 Kings* 17). Others were forced to eke out an existence selling their bodies for food as long as they could.

Jewish law tried to address the vulnerability of widows in a number of different ways. “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow,” *Deuteronomy* proclaims. (*Deut.* 27:19). These three categories of people— “the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow,” or more often “sojourners, widows, and orphans,” appear together so often that it makes the phrase seem like a liturgical refrain, or a legal “term of art” to describe society’s most vulnerable. I’m not going to focus on the orphans this morning because I think it is self-evident to all of us why they would need our love and care. But all three of these categories were beneficiaries of the social welfare system that was built into Jewish law. They could receive financial assistance from certain tithes, were allowed to glean food from other people’s fields, and they were guaranteed justice under the law. (*Deut.* 14:28-29, 27:17; *Ex.* 22:22-24). Above and beyond that, widows specifically were also protected by a different series

of laws in *Deuteronomy* which describe a practice known as Levirate marriage. (*Deut. 25:5-10*).¹ We don't practice these laws today in our nation, or even argue in the Church that we should, notwithstanding the fact that they are biblical. But in some foreign countries they still do.

According to the law, when a woman's husband died, leaving her without male heirs, her brother-in-law, or nearest male relative, was required to take her as his wife, and if possible produce a male heir with her. This was called "redeeming the widow." The baby boy would then inherit the deceased man's property according to the law, so that the land would stay in the family and the widow would have what she needed to survive. If a man refused to marry his dead brother's widow, then the widow was allowed by law to shame him publicly by spitting on him outside of the city gate. This relieved the brother of his duty, gave the widow revenge, and legally made it possible for the next nearest male relative to step up to marry her.

If a man married his brother's widow and then died himself, then she would then be passed on to the next brother available, and so on and so on. This is most likely how the famous Samaritan woman at the well in the *Gospel of John* ended up having five husbands. She wasn't being promiscuous; she was being treated as property and "protected" according to the Law. (*John 4:18*). This is also how Tamar in the book of *Genesis* found herself without a redeemer. After her husband and his brother died, the town began to think of her as a curse to men, so Judah, the next in line, wouldn't marry her. (*Gen. 38*). The whole process sounds pretty awful to our modern ears. Women were given no choice in the matter, and the men very little too. If you have or are a brother-in-law, or are a widow, imagine if we still enforced this law today! But in ancient Israel, this system was seen as a good thing because it ensured that the widows would be cared for, not abandoned to die. The fact that Israel's laws paid any attention to widows at all was one of its distinguishing features.

After all of their husbands died, Naomi tried to get her daughters-in-law to return to their families of origin to live with their fathers until they could remarry. But one of them, Ruth, wouldn't go. She insisted on joining Naomi as she traveled back to Israel to her relatives for help. At Naomi's direction, Ruth gleaned in the fields of Naomi's relatives for food, and ultimately was able to persuade an older relative, Boaz, to redeem her by marrying her. When she produced a male heir, Obed, she not only ensured her own safety, she also ensured Naomi's as well, and as the story reminds us at the end, Obed went on to be an ancestor of David, and therefore a very distant ancestor of Jesus too.

It's a powerful story. But since women in our country are no longer treated as chattel, and since we no longer see the practice of Levirate marriage as a divine solution to every widow's needs, it may not be immediately obvious why Christians today should still feel a special obligation to the widows of the world. After all, we have widows in our congregation who do just fine without needing special assistance. So why not just let this one go, along with the whole Levirate marriage idea?

¹ See Manor, Dale W., "A Brief History of Levirate Marriage as It Relates to the Bible," *RESTORATION QUARTERLY*, 1984, 129-142.

Well, one reason why we can't is that even though widows are not intentionally left to die in our country anymore, they still are elsewhere. According to the United Nation's General Assembly, which has designated every June 23rd Widows' Day, "millions of the world's widows endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health, and discrimination in law and custom."² Of the estimated 258 million widows worldwide, some 115 million, almost half of them, are indigent and deprived by their society in almost every respect.³ I have spent the past week reading some of their stories. They are haunting.

For example, consider Tumushabe, a Ugandan widow whose story was recorded last year in National Geographic.⁴ She lost her husband when he went to the hospital with a bad headache, and died shortly thereafter. In her culture, women are frequently blamed for their husbands' deaths even when they have nothing to do with them. Widows are also seen more as obstacles than family. So after her husband died, a shell-shocked and grieving Tumushabe, who was pregnant at the time in addition to having several other children, was called before the important members of her deceased husband's family and clan. They told her that her children now belonged to them not to her, that she had to keep her hands off of all the crops on her husband's plot because they were no longer hers, and that she must marry her husband's oldest sibling who was 20 years her senior. When she refused to leave her home, children, and crops, and to marry the brother-in-law, she was first threatened and then attacked with a machete. Her story is not unique. Other women in Uganda especially, but in other African countries as well, have reported being attacked and abused, being forced to drink the water used to bathe the husband's dead body, and worse. Thankfully, a program called Action for Rural Women's Empowerment in Uganda, which is funded in part by our denomination's One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, helps women like Tumushabe by informing them of their legal rights and defending them against violence and property-grabbing.⁵

Consider the story of Kanaklata Adhikari, a widow in India, who from the moment she was widowed at age 17 until last year, when she was 96, has been forced to wear white, shave her head, and live as an outcast from her family. Although many of the laws regarding widows are starting to change in India, in rural territories, the old ways still govern. Those ways say that widows must eat only bland food or be vegetarian, are not allowed to wear colorful clothing, and should be treated as socially dead. Frequently kicked out of their families, Indian widows often live on the street on handouts, or gather in little communes with other widows so they have some company in their exile.⁶

² As quoted in "International Widow's Day 23 June," UN.org retrieved July 4, 2018 from <http://www.un.org/en/events/widowsday/background.shtml>. The United Nations General Assembly adopted Widows' Day on Dec. 21, 2010.

³ Blair, Cherie, "Why widowhood is one of the developing world's key problems: International Widows Day gives us a chance to act to address the stigma and the poverty," THE GUARDIAN, U.S. Ed., posted Sat 20 Jun 2015 19:01 EDT, retrieved July 4, 2018 from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/21/international-widows-day-poverty-social-exclusion>

⁴ Gorney, Cynthia, "For Widows, Life After Loss: In some cultures, the death of a husband has meant exile, vulnerability, and abuse. But bereaved women are beginning to fight back", NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE (Feb. 2017), available at <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/02/global-images-of-widows-india-bosnia-uganda-discrimination-exile.html>

⁵ See "Your Gifts at Work in Uganda," Presbyterian Hunger Program, (2017), available at <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/ARUWE-Uganda-2017-update.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid*, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

Many of the world's widows have had their lives ruined by war. In Afghanistan, war widows without male relatives are effectively imprisoned in their homes because they are not allowed to get food or leave their homes without a man accompanying them.⁷ Many end up starving or beaten for being in the streets begging. In Bosnia, war widows are still struggling to find closure because they cannot find their husband's remains. When Bosnian Serbs killed thousands of Bosnian Muslims, they intentionally scattered their bones all over the country so they would not be properly buried. Their widows have struggled ever since.⁸

Even in our own nation which is so much better in many respects because there is no stigma in being a surviving spouse, many widows (and in our country widowers too) still suffer economic hardship because of unspoken, unacknowledged "widow's penalties" built into the system. For example, they pay higher taxes when their spouse dies by virtue of having to file a single return⁹, and may be disadvantaged under the new tax law by virtue of not being able to deduct their spouse's medical expenses. They are also typically charged higher insurance rates automatically.¹⁰ And until recently, legal immigrant widow and widowers of U.S. citizens were frequently deported shortly after their spouses died, if they had been married less than two years. That law was changed in 2009. It's anyone's guess whether it will stay changed under the current administration.¹¹ Widows (and widowers) in our country also suffer from social isolation caused by lack of public transportation, ill health from not having family members to care for them, and poverty.

These realities all more than justify our still caring for widows, as well as orphans and sojourners. In fact, because of these reasons one project that our church's mission task force is considering is how to help the homebound elderly who live alone. But the number one reason in the Bible for us to feel responsibility toward these people is not because they are vulnerable and need help. It's not even because these people are grieving, although their grief is a significant factor in Jewish commentaries about why we need to provide care. The number one reason in Scripture why we need to help these constituencies is because the God we love and worship does. Our God is described as "Father of orphans and protector of widows" and as "a Lord who watches over the strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow" in the *Psalms*. (*Psalms* 68:5; 146:9). Yahweh is distinguished from the gods of other nations in the Law and the Prophets by virtue of this love for widows, orphans, and strangers. Despite all of our God's power and might, you won't hear Yahweh described as "the God of princes and kings," or "the God of warriors and land barons," (although we know that God does love these people too through Christ.) Our God chose to make a name for Godself as the one who cares what happens to those who tend to be seen either as invisible, or seen as nuisances, or who are voiceless. (That's what the Hebrew

⁷ See e.g. "War Widows of Afghanistan," <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/n3csw9bd>

⁸ *Ibid*, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC.

⁹ Carney, Patrick, "What is the Widow's Tax and How Will It Affect Me?", Blog posted Sept. 20, 2016 and retrieved July 4, 2018 from <https://rodgers-associates.com/blog/widows-tax-will-affect-me>

¹⁰ MoneyGeek, "It's Time For Car Insurers to Dump the 'Widow's Penalty'," Benzinga, Oct. 16, 2017, retrieved July 4, 2018 from <https://www.benzinga.com/personal-finance/17/10/10177599/its-time-for-car-insurers-to-dump-the-widows-penalty>

¹¹ "Despite elimination of 'widow penalty,' immigrants still struggle to get legal status in U.S.," THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, updated Jul 15, 2011; Posted Jul 15, 2011 at NJ.com, and retrieved July 4, 2018 from https://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/07/despite_elimination_of_widow_p.html

word for widow, “*almanah*,” conveys. It comes from the root for “one unable to speak.”) Our God is the God who loves those who are silenced by society, and protects those who are endangered, vulnerable, and lost.

We see this in Christ in the New Testament. Although we didn’t hear a story about widows for our New Testament reading today, God’s preoccupation with widows is evident in many texts. Jesus told the story of the widow’s mite to teach about generosity, (*Mark* 12:41-44, *Luke* 21:1-4), and the story of the persistent widow to teach about prayer. (*Luke* 18:1-8). He brought back the dead son of the widow of Nain so that she would not be lost and endangered without him, (*Luke* 7:11-17), empowered the Samaritan woman at the well to be the first preacher of the good news to foreigners, (*John* 4), and arranged when he was on the cross for his own widowed mother to be taken care of by John after he was gone. (*John* 19:26-27). Jesus condemned those “who devour widow’s houses” (*Luke* 20:46-47), and made such a strong impression on his disciples about the importance of not neglecting the vulnerable that one of the first things the disciples did after Pentecost was to elect and designate a team of people, the first deacons, to make sure that the widows and orphans would be fed while the apostles were off sharing the good news. (*Acts* 6:1-6).

The author of the *Letter of James*, who may have been Jesus’ brother, summarized faithfulness to God by saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” (*James* 1:27). I find it striking that he doesn’t define faithfulness according to who tells the world about his brother’s death and resurrection, nor does he define faithfulness in terms of worship or prayer. Instead, James picks the descriptor that our God picked. “If you care for the widows and orphans as God always has, you are being faithful to God.” May we continue to be religious in this way until all around the world widows and orphans will be safe and loved, not by being treated as property, but by being treated as those who are especially beloved to our God. Amen.