

Faith Mennonite Church
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A tale of two widows
I Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44

Widow 1: Widow. That was not my given name but that is how I was known. That is how all women like I were known. We didn't have a man to protect and provide for us, so we were simply widows. We were vulnerable and the children in our care, when our husbands died, were vulnerable too. We were vulnerable in the best of times, but at least if there were good harvests, we could sometimes glean and gather enough grain and grapes to eke out a living. But when the drought came...that was a different story. We went from vulnerable to desperate.

You can call me Sarah. Sarah from Zeraphath has a nice ring, don't you think. You could call me most anything, because there were as many widows as there were women's names. I lived in the region of Sidon, which bordered on Israel. News was often slow in coming to our little town, but it seemed like Israel went through a lot of kings and most of what they said about these kings wasn't very good. Truth be told, I didn't care much about kings because they didn't seem to even know we widows existed.

But I can tell you about a very different kind of man. And he did have a name: Elijah. He was what the people of Israel called "a man of God." I tend to trust what people say about someone, more than what a person says about their own self. I wasn't a religious person, at least not in the Jewish sense, so I was a bit surprised when this "man of God" approached me the morning he arrived at the town gate and I was out looking for fire wood. I thought it was my last trip because I was down to the last bit of flour and had no hope of finding anymore. I thought I'd be making a final meal for my son and me and then we'd just wait to die.

This man asked me for water. That I could bring. Although there was a regional drought, we were still able to draw some water from one of the wells in town. But then he asked for food. And I said, "I'm sorry. I'd like to be hospitable, but there's only enough for one more meal for my son and me." It's funny now when I think back on our exchange. He didn't demand that I hand over the food, like soldiers would sometimes do when they'd pass through town. But he gently asked and assured me that there would still be enough for my son and me if we fed him first—and not just for one last meal. Something made me trust him even though he came empty handed. And I'm so glad I did! Because Elijah became like family, a member of our household, and the flour and the oil somehow kept sustaining us.

While Elijah lived with us he told us of the troubles in his country, of all the kings who just cared for themselves and their families. They thought they were the real deal, but when they got into desperate situations and wanted to know what they should do, they'd turn to the men of God—the prophets. But then they'd just get mad because prophets like Elijah would usually say the same thing, time and again: God executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. God lifts up the people who are bowed down, watches over strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow. The kings never seemed to get that. But Elijah seemed to understand God in a new, more profound way because of his experience of living with us. And we certainly felt blessed. There was always just enough.

Widow 2: Widow. That was my name too. It sounds like things didn't change a lot in 500 years for women like us. But my story was a bit different because I lived in the city—Jerusalem—the "City of Peace." And it was home to the temple, the Jewish temple, that beautiful place our ancestors built and that our prophets envisioned as a place of prayer "for all the nations." But my city wasn't peaceful and the temple—not so much about prayer.

My city, my whole country, was occupied by Rome. We were a distant out-post but they kept their thumb on us nonetheless. The peace, or shalom, that was at the heart of our Jewish identity and relationship with God, was not just violated by the presence of Roman soldiers who could demand just about anything at anytime, but it seemed that even our religious leaders had forgotten that peace meant

having a home and having enough to eat and feeling safe. And that God intended those things for everyone, including the widows and orphans.

I never stopped believing that and I never gave up going to the temple to pray. No matter how noisy that place could get sometimes, with all the animals that were brought in for sale and sacrifice--at a profit to someone, I'm sure--I would seek out a quiet corner and recite the prayers my parents had taught me. I hear that you're still praying our prayers. I'm glad to know that. The prayer you call Psalm 146 was one I prayed everyday because it gave me so much hope:

Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live;

Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob and Rachel, ...the God who made heaven and earth... who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. This God watches over the strangers; upholds the orphan and the widow...This God will rule forever!

Some of my widow friends told me I was crazy to keep going to the temple, and especially to put my few coins in the treasury. "Why do you give money when they don't do anything for us? They're robbing you, when they should be helping you. You're no better than one of those sacrificial lambs."

It hurt. It's always hard to be misunderstood. But I decided to keep believing in a different reality. Keep believing that God was keeping faith with us. I chose to see my two copper coins—my pittance—not as a sacrifice but as an offering. Not to the vultures but to God. For I did enjoy the temple and since my ancestors helped build it I wanted to keep supporting it.

One day as I was leaving and placed my offering in the treasury, I overheard the teacher Jesus comment to his student-followers about me. I think he knew my intentions and my love for the temple. I had heard stories about his teaching out in the countryside and everyone always described him as being wise, as being like the "men of God" from long ago—like Elijah. So I followed along that day, at a distance but close enough to hear him. He sounded a lot like my widow friends; he didn't see much future for the temple either. He said it was being co-opted by certain leaders and people with a lot of money and power. They used the temple to enrich themselves at the expense of folks like me and to the demise of the temple's true purpose. He said the temple would crumble. If someone else had said that, I would have been offended. But Jesus didn't talk the same way as some of the other revolutionary leaders. It wasn't like he was telling us to bring down the temple, but that the temple system would crumble under its own weight of injustice.

Looking back, I think Jesus understood himself to be like the temple--whose purpose was to show the way to God. Yet the system of injustice would crush him too. And it did, and he died. But that wasn't the end. Just like the widow of Zarephath's flour wasn't the end. And my two copper coins were never the end. Jesus' death only gave way to greater life, and you're proof of that today! When we offer the little or the much that we have to God who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry, who watches over strangers and upholds the orphan and the widow, the work of our God who keeps faith continues.

Widows. Thank you for listening to our stories. We hear that there are still widows and orphans and people in prison and people who are hungry and homeless. If you're one of those folks, we're glad that you're here because your story is just as important as ours. And if others of you are fortunate to be living in God's shalom, with a house and food and caring friends we're happy for you. We make great partners. You learn from us like Elijah and Jesus' students did, and together we offer ourselves to God for the world. Wow, we wonder what we might do together!