

Three Widows and a Post Election

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On this post-election Sunday, with preliminary results in and candidates already conceding the race, I intend to give us all time to hear each other. We have been doing that already, some

of us, via the emails that have been sent out on the Seekers email communication channel. I have been appreciative of the ping of new mail from another Seeker with a poem or prayer or recording, but it is not the same as being in person together.

The scripture readings for today share the experiences of 3 widows. Naomi, Ruth and the unnamed widow in the gospel reading all had to find a way through life. They were underdogs; they were overlooked; they were, by society's measure, irrelevant. But that isn't how God sees them.

Naomi had double sets of losses with having both lost her husband and her sons and no grandchildren to sustain the family. It is somewhat unfortunate that our reading skips over a bunch of context and events that help fill in details.

I hand it to Naomi for bringing her own skills and resources to finding a way to survive and thrive. Naomi possesses a fine understanding of religious law. She understands that Boaz, as a relative, has an obligation to support the extended family. There is a concept of kin-redeemer that can be used to draw Boaz into supporting her and her daughter-in-law. While the strict reading of it would have involved her becoming Boaz's wife, she also recognized the lack of feasibility in doing that – she is too old. But she is cunning enough to know that Ruth, if she was game to it, could do the same. Naomi uses her political acumen to devise a legally flawless way to get what she needs.

Being a widow and being an immigrant are two strikes against Ruth. No paperwork process existed then to convert her into a full citizen. She chose to travel with her mother-in-law back to Isreal and support Naomi. She worked hard each day in the fields to provide for them, likely getting to know Boaz in that group setting. Ruth chose to trust Naomi's political

acumen. Naomi's directions were for Ruth to prostrate herself to Boaz while he slept on the threshing floor.

I was under the impression that this meant Naomi asked Ruth to become a prostitute to Boaz, but my recent reading has suggested that this may not be the case. The action of uncovering and sleeping on his feet was a ritual for servants/slaves. In any event, Ruth was willing to sacrifice her autonomy for longer term survival. If you read the parts in between what we have here, you do get to know about Boaz's surprise to find Ruth and the subsequent actions he took to exercise his kin-redeemer role and marry Ruth. Her trust in both her mother-in-law and Boaz are to be credited for their survival. And Ruth, the immigrant, is part of the family lineage that led to David and to Jesus.

Finally, we have the widow in the Mark story. The temple treasury was the source of charitable giving to the needy in the larger community. As Mark noted, it was also a general fund that often was abused by the scribes – allowing them to pay themselves first from it and then give what was left to the needy.

Mark's widow gave everything she had. She chose to care for the whole community, not just herself. She chose to trust that the community would also look out for her and her needs. As Kate Lasso in the recent Inward/Outward ([Between Us | Inward/Outward](https://inwardoutward.org/between-us/) (inwardoutward.org) <https://inwardoutward.org/between-us/>) stated, "The story of the widow who gives her all in her own fragmented world is an example of someone whose understanding of self has moved beyond the isolated concept of *little ol' me* to that of connection to the Divine whose abundance is overflowing. In a world mesmerized (even paralyzed) by the power others hold, she reminds me that even small acts can hold profound meaning as an expression of relationship rooted in God's love, a love beyond our understanding."

While we are given three women's stories to help inform and shape our own faith, the structure of society still dismisses widows and women. God didn't change those rules. And I will admit that it pisses me off.

I don't know about you, but when I woke up on Wednesday after a long day of serving as a chief election judge, and I read the headlines, I was shocked, surprised, confused, saddened. I felt like I awoke in a country I did not recognize.

The election analysis I have heard has stressed the importance of people's sentiments about the economy. It has identified various populations who feel they have been left behind. People who feel they have not "gotten their share". With those sentiments, they chose an alternative to the current leadership.

Personally, when I read Mark, the gospel reading for today, I admit that there are some names I mentally put on the list as being my current day equivalent of the scribe or pharisee. I wish that the Jesus we encounter in Mark was like the one in Matthew – willing to throw over the money changers tables. Why is this Jesus just sitting here watching? Why doesn't he do something not just say something?

It is really easy for me to put myself in the role of the widows in these stories. After all, I am a widow – have been for the past 3 years. Yet, I do realize my status as a widow has not automatically reduced me to be impoverished. I did get to inherit the home jointly owned with Jeffrey as well as other resources owned together. I inherited Jeffrey's investments and have some on my own from working. I must look again at these stories and take on other roles – whether Boaz or the scribes. Is there someone who needs my help and, by virtue of relationship, I am obligated to support? Am I, like the scribes, robbing the church offering plate for my own good? Robbing society?

So, while I wish that Jesus “did something” in the Mark text, he really did not just observe, he did “do something” with his words and reflections on what he saw.

I confess I too often ignore the value of words – words to build up, words to name injustice, words to change the perspective. The Jesus we encounter here in Mark sees value in words – words to change the societal value structure – Jesus saying that the widow’s pennies had more worth in God’s eyes than the significant \$ contributions of the rich. Words that call out injustice – Jesus’ identification of how the scribes trampled on the poor and will have a final condemnation.

Words such as these can offer hope – granted they do not change the structure now. Our challenge with Jesus is about timing – when? When will this happen? When will injustice stop? When will society value the poor more than the rich? When will the widow have more value than the scribe?

Why isn’t he doing something now?

In Mark, these words were shared with Jesus’ disciples, they were teaching words. Jesus is, indirectly, naming that these are things that the disciples need to do. Making these injustices stop and societal values change is work for the disciples to do. For us to do still today. And if we cannot get the work done today, to find others to teach and equip for the work ahead.

We also can use all our knowledge and skills to ensure our survival and that of our extended community. We may need to become legally and politically astute. We might have to prostrate our own egos and opinions for longer term survival. And we may need to sacrifice more, to the point of depending on the larger community for our own well-being. We also may need to do hard self-assessments. What roles have we played in these past stories/readings? What roles do we choose to play in the on-going story? Do we need to be a kin-redeemer for the

surprising popular majority that feel marginalized? Do we need to take less and share more?

Each person I meet is my neighbor, regardless of how they voted on Tuesday, and I have an obligation to love them, to care for them, to work with them to build and sustain our community, our country, our world.