

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
RUTH 3:1-5; 4:13-17
PSALM 127
HEBREWS 9:24-28
MARK 12:38-44
November 10, 2024

Widows Are Us!

The Psalmist declares that “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for God gives sleep to the beloved of God.” At the fear of stating the obvious this morning, I know that we gather for worship as a congregation today with so many of us confused and jolted, a hurting people, heavy hearts shaken to the core, to the very depths of our souls, exacerbated by a very real and evolving dose of fear fueled by a sense of impending dread and imminent danger, all combined, adding to our dis-ease. As the writer of the One Hundred and Twenty-Seventh Psalm suggests, filled with more than a little, more than ample, yes, plenty of anxiety. In all candor and honesty, admitting to a severe case of nerves while making a true confession, I am probably sharing as much, if not more, anxiety this morning than I am alleviating. Preparing to preach on days like today are beyond challenging, beyond my pay grade this morning, on this Sunday after, as it is for every preacher facing a distraught congregation. Preparing a sermon in the hopes of accomplishing what I, and you, would like to do is next to impossible! My goal, as they strangely say in sports, is to stay within myself and not make the moment, this moment, too big, because it really feels, really seems that way, way too big.

It is in the Gospel of Matthew (6:25-34) where we are told not to worry, not to be anxious! But we are not the birds of the air or the lilies of the field, are we? Good luck with that! Our spirits have been injured with what so many perceive as perhaps the ultimate insult, an outcome we never really imagined, our spirits dejected almost beyond the breaking point! Our cup sadly overfloweth! Today, as we have since Tuesday night, we look for ways to take deep breaths, individually and collectively! Breathe in! Breathe out! Inhale! Exhale! As John Thomas, former General Minister and President of our beloved United Church of Christ says in a sermon he is preaching today, “In the heat of a campaign it’s easy to attach ultimate significance to a candidate or a party rather than, at most, a more appropriate penultimate significance. As Mark (in the Gospel lection for today) reminds us, just because many of our politicians sashay around in fancy clothes and sit in the best seats and the places of honor, and wrap themselves in pious trappings, just because they fill our television screens and our media feeds and bask in the adulation of crowds at rallies, it doesn’t somehow transform them into deities or even models to follow. . . If today you are feeling discouraged, anxious, frightened, even despondent, take hold of the encouragement of our faith, and let your heart take courage. And if today you are feeling rather satisfied, tempted even to

gloat, heed the warning of our faith. The fundamental conviction of the first Christians, both liberating and enormously risky, was that Caesar is never Lord. And it remains as true today no matter in what guise the would be Caesars of our lives present themselves.” Thomas then quoted Alfred Lord Tennyson, “Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be: they are but broken lights of thee, and thou, O Lord, art more than they!” Good words to remember!

In an article titled “NOW WHAT? Who Do We Choose to Be?” United Church of Christ minister Cameron Trimble laments, “Today, many of us feel shaken. For those who had hoped for a different vision of our shared future, these election results are painful. We find ourselves facing uncertain days ahead, and it’s natural to feel fear when so much is at stake. Many of us are worried—not just for ourselves, but for those we love, and for our communities and our country. Our hearts ache for the America we hoped we were building.” “As we hold this moment together, a timeless question invites us to center ourselves: ‘Who do we choose to be?’ We may not be able to control the circumstances we’re facing, but we do have power over our response, over the values we embody, and the spirit we bring to those around us. Now, more than ever, we’re called to be people who answer hate with love, division with community, injustice with courage, and fear with truth. This isn’t easy, but it’s the work that people of faith and conviction have taken up for generations . . . **Hard work is ahead, and we will need courage, patience, and resilience. Let’s commit to being people of peace and purpose, holding each other up, and choosing—again and again—the path of Love. We are in this together, friends. Together, we can bring light to even the darkest paths.**”

Initially, the sermon for today was intended to deal exclusively with Stewardship, the first of two sermons offered during this season of Thanksgiving and gratitude dedicated to that worthy, necessary and timely topic. Those remarks will certainly be implied throughout much of this sermon, that theme unavoidable simply based on the lections chosen for today. **In the Witness from the Gospels in Mark, we call attention to the story focusing on an unnamed and unknown widow who gave all she had to God as she put her last coins into the Temple treasury, a text forever known as “the widow’s mite.”** Surely the phrase about our “putting in our two cents worth” originated from this story of generosity, commitment, and resolve. **Along with the companion reading from the Hebrew Bible in the book of Ruth, a narrative that is one of the lectionary texts selected for today but not read in our hearing, I think that widows and orphans have a lot to tell us and teach us as we reflect on the events of this past Tuesday, as we catch our breath and begin to more fully grasp, coming to reality about all that has transpired during this whirlwind of a week. Interestingly, if not ironically, the book of Ruth is a story about immigrants, yes, migrants, talk about timely. Ruth was the quintessential immigrant, a widow who intermarries in what would have been a shocking development when originally read back in the day. Betrothed to Boaz, using every feminine wile at her disposal, women having so little agency in ancient Israelite culture, this strong woman was already firmly planted as she chose to permanently settle in what for her was a foreign country, loyal to Naomi her former mother-in-law, with all the hopes and dreams, with all the fears and anxiety, the inherent risks as an alien, a foreigner, a stranger, in play. There was a baseline biblical expectation, a hospitable mandate, a clear and present requirement, of the way a host nation was to treat the outsider, the other, no matter the means of the many ways these homeless folks found themselves as guests of the host Israelite nation. The were not to be regarded as interlopers,**

invaders, insignificant. That extravagant level of invitation, of hospitable welcome, historically has always been beautifully woven into the fabric of this country, despite a groundswell that suggests that these refugees to our border are uninvited, and even unwelcome, as obviously many people on our shores, the country of the “tired and poor”, claim them to be.

I need to tell you how difficult it was to prepare this sermon, how challenging to write words that I hope against all hope bring some solace, some comfort and consolation. Koheleth, the mysterious preacher, toward the beginning of the book of Ecclesiastes (3:1-11) says that there is a time for everything, that there is a season in this life dictated by this life, spawned by the events, the circumstances and situations, that frame our everyday lives. You know the litany well, “a time to mourn and a time to dance” especially poignant, so prophetically relevant, in these difficult hours raising so many questions, providing so few answers. As I preach what for me is about as raw and rough a sermon as I can write, I am reminded in the wisdom of this profound book from the Hebrew Bible, that there indeed is a time, there is a season. There will be many days ahead in which priestly acts continue to be routine, ritual always healing in its own unique way, prophetic words from this pulpit driving the homiletical narrative as we live the coming days, but that today, I truly, sincerely, pray that my lame attempt at offering something helpful to all of us, assuaging our anxiety, at least to a degree, that I say something tangible that we can take away today, that is pastoral, pastoral in every caring and compassionate way that the shepherding pastoral image conveys. Even though we walk a pathway seemingly bathed in darkness, sensing danger, what may seem like a lonely valley surrounded by, cloaked in, the shadow of death, we will have no fear because the rod and staff of God is with us! I want to be transparent, honestly declaring to you, that while these sermonic words are written, composed at my computer, as they always are, that these are the musings of my heart, as much if not more, than of my mind, though degrees of separation are impossible. Today, frankly, as is every day in the fellowship of beloved faith community, we must lean on one another, support each other, console and grieve with one another, doing what we do naturally in this fellowship of joy divine, but now must do intentionally, fully and soberly engaged. The beauty of this people, all of us, First Congregational folk, is that we cry together, we laugh together, we celebrate together, and yes, we lament together, lament having a long biblical tradition, a healthy way to express to God honestly, forthrightly, our anger, our sadness, all our negative emotions. God can handle what we are feeling, what we are thinking, what we are expressing. We are blessed to loudly verbalize our emotional reactions, every internal or external scream we might let loose an essential, very important, indeed, a cathartic exercise. We can cry out to God just like the ancients taught us in these sacred biblical texts, emulating them in the same transparently honest way they said what was on their hearts and minds. Invoking an image of the suffering servant motifs from the prophet Isaiah (chapter 53), out of these stripes and wounds, perhaps we become the consummate wounded healers, and in our healing of one another find healing and wholeness for ourselves.

In our reading from today in the Gospel according to Mark, we find Jesus as he is frequently described, going through his routine, the usual motions, busy at work teaching, fulfilling his role as a rabbi. In previous weeks we have read about his continual sparring with the scribes, most of it confrontational and counterproductive, one episode, however, delightfully standing out above all

others, turning out to be of redeeming value, indeed a serendipitous moment in the ongoing Jesus story. Jesus offers a word of warning about these interpreters of the law, a rather risky move by the man from Nazareth, declaring to his hearers that they should beware, that they should always be on their guard, to invoke some previous imagery from Psalm 27, wary of the scribes “who like to walk around in long robes and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets.” After all, he adds, “They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.” Surely these words, stating the obvious, while at the same time if not in some weird way, offering a backhanded affirmation, immediately bring to mind the plight of widows of orphans in the ancient world. Yes, there they were, almost invisible among all those who had gathered to listen intently to what Jesus had to say. We quickly can recall vivid images of all those described in the Gospels who represent the clearly down and out as we say, those victimized because of who they were. The phrase widows and orphans throughout the biblical narrative conveys both literal and metaphorical meaning, the status, or lack thereof, of these disenfranchised, marginalized, individuals commonly understood, because of where they stood, ignored as collateral damage, disregarded, and, yes, discarded, by the rank and file, the average Joes and Janes of society, if they were noticed at all. The Bible is careful to note, specifically so, the command to be attentive to widows and orphans, yes, to purposefully offer hospitality in all its myriad manifestations, in every beautiful form, an expectational gift, an act of faithful obedience to the law, to Torah, required to be given to what was unfortunately a large and growing people group. The danger with widows and orphans, singling them out, as with any who struggle because of what are often the inherent inequities of life, is to simply categorize them, making them blurred faces in the crowd, a convenient way of dismissing them outright, lumping them all together in one bucket by considering them the other. By benignly or intentionally doing so, sidelines them as fringe elements, thus dehumanizing them, making them invisible, unrecognizable, turning them into faceless, nameless, legions of the masses. They were and are human beings, whose presence sadly was, and is by many today, perceived and received as an annoyance, seen as a nuisance, even as a threat.

A foreshadowing of this reading from Mark is found in the story of the widow of Zarephath in her encounter with the prophet Elijah. This widow, poor as poor could get, had given up all hope, waiting for her starving son, her orphaned son, to die, because she was a widow with no means, no agency whatsoever. The lamp is almost out, the food almost gone, and there is the prophet Elijah daring to call forth from her, asking for her last morsel for himself. Yikes! She complies, the model now on display once again in our Markan reading for today as a widow gives her last two coins, almost worthless, but more valuable than we can tell, than we may ever know, priceless in every way imaginable. The easiest read of this story is that this woman gives all she has so go and do likewise. Simple enough! The depth of the Bible is never that easy, never that simple. Jesus saw this widow in two ways. First, he saw that she was there, that she had presence, that she mattered, that she was a person, a real flesh and blood human being. Second, he saw in her a person of deep faith, someone who believed that in her faithful trust of God that she would not be forgotten or ignored, despite everyone around her seeing right through her, seeking to avoid her like the plague, eye contact always disconcertingly uncomfortable in those poignant moments. If we cannot see the humanity in widows, widows representing every person who is fragile and flawed in some way, shape, or form, every person imaginable, all human beings vulnerably compromised in some capacity, to some

degree, if we cannot see the humanity in others, all others, then we cannot find the humanity in ourselves. Indeed, we have lost our way, civility as a baseline long abandoned as a relic of a past that perhaps, probably, by and large, never existed in the first place. Widows appear in every human form matter! Widows are us! Ironically, widows are us only if and when we are lucky enough to see and to be seen! Irony of irony!

Had the election on this past Tuesday gone in the other direction, there would have been no sermon addressing the outcome, no need for it. There would, as you can imagine, have been prayers for the nation just as we are offering them today, prayers for peace, civility, humility, unity. Despite the desire, the wish, the temptation to make partisan comments, we will hold, I will hold, faithfully, religiously, steadfastly, to our sacred covenant upholding our binding non-partisan leanings, pun intended. All that being said, knowing the level of hurt and pain that is felt by a large majority in this room, words must be spoken, acknowledgments made. So, I tread lightly, balancing on what seems like a highwire act, straddling boundaries, speaking with a palpable and sincere amount of fear and trembling, a heightened awareness, of my responsibility and calling to never mix politics and the pulpit, the two mutually exclusive and inclusive polarities always making for discomfort, uncomfortable bedfellows of a never-allowable, never acceptable, kind, despite how convenient as crossing that threshold seems to be for so many in steeple work today. So, with all the risks associated with this congregational conversation, we must name the many elephants in the room, pun not intended, knowing that many people woke up on Wednesday morning feeling, sensing in their spirit that they were at high risk, highly vulnerable, full of high anxiety. Whatever actions are taken moving ahead, we must and will continue to insist on human rights, appropriately fighting for people to be treated with, at the minimum, respect, valued as human beings with all the inalienable rights that come with our humanity. We know the people who are at risk, we can name them one by one, and they add up to many. Our country will be on trial, will be judged by how we treat the last and least of these, the first and greatest, as always, no matter party affiliation, for each side of the aisle is greatly, substantially, emboldened, empowered with every tool in the political toolbox. **All things considered this morning, no doubt our heads still spinning, we must not lose our resolve, ever becoming a stronger voice for the voiceless even if our voice is a lone voice crying in the wilderness, calling from deep within us all the John the Baptist mojo we can muster. We answer to a higher calling, the highest calling there is, to be a follower and an emissary of Christ Jesus, copying his way as our blueprint for living, putting his way above every way, even when it looks like no way. We are called to be a witness, proudly giving our testimony about the loving grace of Christ Jesus, sharing the love of God, and yes, the prophetic has crept into my preaching despite my best, or poorest efforts, to stay out of that lane this morning.**

As always, the lectionary rings the homiletical bell, giving us just what we need, exactly what is ordered, for such a time as this, or anytime. Both texts, from Ruth and from Mark, can greatly serve to inform us if we are attentive, as we try and pick up the pieces and look to move forward into what we always believe will be a brighter future, continuing to believe, hoping and praying, if not knowing, that there are better days ahead, that God is somehow in the midst and ultimately in control. With every passing day we anticipate, we expect, the dawn of a new day, a day where the rough places become plain and the mountains brought low, the valleys exalted, the playing field made level, days when our

mourning will be turned into gladness, our despair into rejoicing. Our greatest hope, yes, leaning into words we read many times over and over and over again, is that an Easter sunrise always looms on the horizon, the darkness of the cross planted firmly in the rearview mirror. Yes, we envision leaning and one day living into the eternal hope of God's realm come on earth, beating swords into plowshares, yes, in every corner, on earth as it is in heaven, the hopes and dreams for best days ahead always a real possibility, flipping the exclusively narrow narrative for humanity and all creation.

The widows and orphans surround us. They are everywhere, ubiquitous in our global village, a reminder to all of us of the baseline to be human, every time, all the time. We will continue the struggle for social justice, not merely a silent majority or minority, whichever it truly is these days, doing what we can, whatever justice looks like on a given day. Peace in our land is our goal! Peacemaking is the way we go about our business. We trust in the Spirit of God to see us through to a different, a better and brighter, day. Today, many of us are licking our wounds and will continue to do so. Grief work is process work, and the process is always arduous, the labor long and hard, oh so tedious and tiring in so many ways. **My prayer for you and for me, for all of us, is a prayer for grace and healing, for the gift of divine presence, for wholeness, and that you be saturated with the love of God, so full that your extravagant love spills over onto everyone you meet and greet, until all are fed and full, every human suffering vanquished, the widows and orphans in our midst and beyond sated beyond their wildest dreams. My prayer is that we internalize and externalize, sharing the essence of the call of the prophet Micah, to love kindness, do justice, and walk humbly with our God, in every way that beautiful imagery can be imagined and portrayed in the world. I close this sermon in the same way that John Thomas is ending his sermon this morning, imitation, even a dose of homiletical plagiarism, being the best form of flattery, "Come what may, it is not the vanity of a Pollyanna, but the courage of faith, to affirm that under God's light, within God's stronghold, and always in the widow's path, in the words of the mystic Mother Julian, 'all will be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things will be well.'" As Journey once sang, "Don't stop believing!"**

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is with us in our darkest hours, our finest hours, and every hour in between! Amen and amen!