

Repairing the System
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44
November 12, 2006

Back in the Old Wild West, they sometimes called the Colt-45 revolver “the widowmaker,” because this six-gun was so effective. The ancient Hebrews, like many societies then as well as today, lived in a “widowmaking” society. Girls were expected to marry as soon as they could bear children. Brides were sometimes as young as thirteen or fourteen years old. The groom, on the other hand, had to be “settled” and financially secure before he “took” a wife. Thus the husband was generally much older than the wife. Then as now, men didn’t live as long, on the average, as women. Do the math: many young brides plus many older husbands equals many widows: a “widowmaking” society.

Unless she remarried or went to live with her parents if they were still alive or a son if she had one, a widow’s situation could become desperate. Women had few property rights. They inherited nothing from their husbands. By law, the largest part of whatever there was to inherit went to the eldest son. Younger sons, if there were any, received lesser portions. Usually there wasn’t much to inherit anyway. Many families lived from hand to mouth. They had little opportunity to accumulate wealth.

Widows were marginalized and often oppressed, the underclass of society. Many had about as many resources, financially speaking, as street people today.¹ The Hebrew word for widow connotes one who is silent, one unable to speak. This voiceless status left widows in a position of extreme vulnerability. Many scriptures in the Old Testament criticize the harsh treatment of these women and speak of the special protection they are to be offered.

This morning we hear the rest of the story of Ruth and Naomi, two widows without sons to care for them. They are resourceful and clever in finding Naomi’s next of kin, Boaz, who fulfills the obligation of the closest male relative. Ruth and Naomi’s story has a happy ending. The child born to Ruth, the grandchild of Naomi, is called a “restorer of life and a nourisher of old age.” Naomi’s fortune is reversed. The emptiness that made her bitter is now filled with new life.

But not every widow has such good fortune. In the temple Jesus notices a widow who is so poor that she owns no more than two small coins. *The King James Version* calls those coins “mites.” In Old England, two mites made up one farthing, a penny. At that time one day’s wage was sixty-four “pennies.” All the woman owns is 1/32 of a day’s wage.

The temple treasury may have been thirteen trumpet-shaped chests, each designated for different taxes or offerings. The amount of each gift would have been announced by the sound reverberating as the metal coins clanged in the metal chests. The sound of many coins clanging their way to the bottom of the chest would have been a stark contrast to the barely noticeable clink of two small coins lovingly given by the poor widow.

After the widow puts her last mite into the offering, she is literally “penniless.” Jesus remarks that she gives “everything she had, all she had to live on.” Though the coins are not worth much monetarily, Jesus describes their value as her whole living. Jesus witnesses a woman surrendering her entire estate to the very institution that is supposed to protect her. More than commending the woman’s generosity, he is lamenting the unjust system that has reinforced her state of poverty.

To understand this, we need to have a sense of the larger context. This scene in Mark’s Gospel concludes two chapters set in the temple of Jerusalem, the holiest of religious sites. Upon entering Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus goes to the temple. He chases the commercial vendors out of the temple grounds. Ancient temples functioned as our modern banks, changing money, storing personal and family treasures, holding funds for oaths, and transacting other financial and commercial business. In cleansing the temple, Jesus is saying that the temple is meant to be a house of prayer, not a primary site of commerce.

Jesus continues teaching in the temple. He refers to the practice of “devouring widows’ houses” (12:40). Scribes were often assigned as trustees of the estates left to widows (apparently women could not be trusted to manage the estates of their husbands). As compensation the scribes would usually get a percentage of the assets; the practice was notorious for embezzlement and abuse. Although the scriptures call for the protection of orphans and widows, these socially vulnerable classes were often exploited by the very authorities entrusted with their welfare.

Jesus uses the widow’s offering as a teachable moment for his disciples. He says, “The poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (43-44). He notes that the temple system has robbed his woman of her very means of livelihood. The temple no longer protects widows, but rather it exploits them. Jesus is angry at the injustice of a system that robs the poor.

In the next chapter of Mark, Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple. He says, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be

left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (13:2). Jesus is envisioning the destruction of the temple’s socio-economic system that exploits the poor.

Jesus insists that his disciples not adopt the social standards of power and influence. Religious authorities should be defenders of the widow, the orphan, and the poor. They should not use their position to access the influence and power of the wealthy, for in so doing they become agents of destruction. They are to be like Boaz, treating the oppressed as members of the family and taking the risk to restore life on their behalf. Disciples are called to be agents of hope, working to revive the promise of life given to all living beings.

An unlikely group found themselves in a position to change an institution on behalf of one of their own who was oppressed. A hearing impaired child was in a mainstream class of second graders, all of whom could hear. The powers-that-be ordered the hearing impaired child be moved to a specialized school for the deaf. When the boy’s classmates heard about it, they objected. They liked him. He was a nice guy and fun to have around. They didn’t want to see him go. His fellow second graders all volunteered to learn to communicate in sign language. This would enable the hearing impaired boy to participate more fully in their lessons. The second grade class took on the system and won! They communicated in sign language with one another as well as the boy who could not hear the spoken word! Their classmate was allowed to remain in the mainstream school.² Justice was served.

This morning’s readings call us to be discerning about the integrity of the institutions and systems in which we participate. Too frequently in our consumer culture we get caught up in serving ourselves without thought of how our actions or the products we buy impact others. We are embarking upon the busiest shopping season of the year. Our mailboxes and newspapers are inundated with catalogs, mailers, and advertisements. It is tempting to get sucked into the frenzy and feel that we need and deserve more than we have already got in this wealthiest nation of the world.

Perhaps it is the season to look differently at our participation in this consumer mentality. Most of us don’t need more stuff. Our basic needs are comfortably met. We might consider how we can purchase things in a way that is helpful to others. Our church will offer opportunities for alternative gifts to programs such as Heifer Project International, which sends animals around the world, and Habitat for Humanity, which builds homes for those seeking homes. Programs such as Ten Thousand Villages and SERRV work with poor producers in the South to market products in the North.

Fair Trade has been helpful to cooperatives of small farmers in Central and South America. Workers and farmers in developing countries are able to sell coffee, cocoa, tea, sugar, nuts, spices, and rice in broader markets for fair prices. Those who have been economically disadvantaged are given an equitable playing field, which ensures certain standards around gender equity, child labor, and working conditions. The cost to us may be more than less expensive products we buy from major corporations, but the benefit to workers and farmers in developing countries is immeasurable. Not only do they benefit financially by receiving fair prices for their products, but they also receive the gift of dignity, of being treated as valuable members of our global community. Oftentimes a “social premium” is invested in community projects, such as water wells or schools. Buying Fair Trade products is one way in which we can consciously choose to participate in a system that is just. It is a way that we can put our values into practical application.

This morning we were moved by a beautiful song from our youth. The words they sang are the heart of this message: “I need you. You need me. We’re all a part of God’s body. Stand with me. It is God’s will that every need be supplied. You are important to me. I need you to survive. I’ll pray for you. You pray for me. I love you. I need you to survive.”³

The poor & outcast need us to survive. We’re all a part of God’s body. Let us stand together to repair the broken systems for we need one another.

¹ Alex Gondola, Jr., *Lectionary Homiletics*, November 2006, p. 58.

² Robert Kysar, *Lectionary Homiletics*, November 2000, p. 15.

³ Hezekiah Walker.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA