

## The Legacy of the Widows

1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Mark 12:38-44  
November 8, 2015 — 24th Sunday after Pentecost  
The Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

**[SLIDE 26]** The Scriptures are filled with examples of faith: examples to follow and examples to avoid. Today's readings present us with four examples of faith: two widows, a prophet and some wealthy scribes.



The widow of Zarephath is a Syro-Phoenician pagan woman living in the region of Sidon. In a time of draught and famine, an Israelite prophet comes to her seeking food. The widow protests that she has only a handful of flour and a little jug of oil to make a final meal for herself and her son. She does not have enough to share with a stranger.

The destitute widow in the temple who puts her last two copper coins in the treasury is a member of God's people. Yet we wonder what on earth was she thinking? Why would someone who is destitute and dependent on handouts from family, friends, and neighbors give away her last two coins? Is she trying to affirm that in spite of her poverty she has something worthwhile to offer the community? Is she demonstrating to herself and to those who are watching that even in her poverty she is a person of worth? Is she naive and foolish, dangerously irresponsible, or perhaps just plain crazy?

Which of these two widows do you identify with?

I have to confess that it is much easier to see myself in the widow of Zarephath than the widow in the temple. Although I have never had to worry where my next meal is coming from, often I feel like I don't have enough time, enough energy, enough money to do all the things that I need or want to do. My lifelong complaint has been that I am not tall enough. This mindset of not having enough, of not being good enough is really easy to slip into. We live in a culture that is constantly telling us in one way or another we are just not good enough.

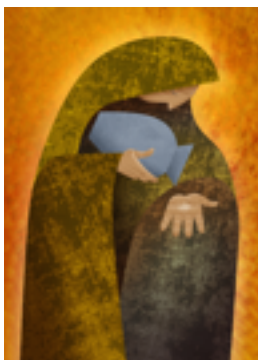
I can identify with the poor widow in the temple up to a point. For example, I know that I cannot by my own personal efforts solve the problems of homelessness and food insecurity here in Cedar Rapids, but I can make a difference by giving to the church and other social organizations. Through these organizations my small contributions are multiplied and have a bigger impact. But the widow in the temple is doing way more than that. She gives everything she has. The original Greek says she gave her whole life. To be perfectly honest, I can't do that, I won't do that. I've never met a person who has done what the widow in the temple did. In my first call a widow did leave her entire estate to the church. But that happened after she died and she didn't need it anymore. It was a much appreciated gift to the church, but not exactly the same as the widow in the temple who gave her last penny while still living.

How do you feel about the other two characters we meet in today's scriptures?

I really do not want to be like those scribes who strut around in their long fancy robes expecting everyone to make a big deal of them, spouting long windy prayers to impress people, donating large sums of money, acquired by devouring widows' houses. Jesus condemns them for their flashy, self-centered hypocrisy. I really don't want to be like that, I'm afraid that I might be once in a while.

And then there's the prophet Elijah. He's angry that the king's foreign born wife has brought Ba'al worship to Israel. She is a princess from Sidon, so what does God do? God sends Elijah to Sidon, to the home of a Ba'al worshipping widow. To this widow who believes she does not have enough to share, Elijah says: "Do not be afraid ... trust God ... you will have enough ... The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail."

It is my calling as a pastor to be like Elijah, lifting up, encouraging and equipping God's people, but deep down I'm often more like the widow of Zarephath who needs an Elijah in her life. Like the widow of Zarephath, I have learned that trusting God, and leaning on the strengths and gifts of the people God has put in my life enabling me to do things I thought were beyond my capacity. All of us are called to be like Elijah, to step out of our comfort zones, to reach out across the boundaries that keep people apart and share the good news that every person is good enough, and that together we have enough of what it takes to care for each other, that together we can make a difference. **[STEPS 1 & 2]**



It seems to me that St. Stephen's is most like the widow of Zarephath. Sometimes we are afraid we don't have enough. Yet, with the encouragement of many Elijahs over the years this congregation has courageously stepped up in faith. Even after 65 years, giving birth to three new congregations, sending 8 pastors to serve the ELCA, training up 4 interns, helping rebuild the community after the flood of 2008, sending mission teams to Tanzania, Haiti and Eritrea, sponsoring refugees, and so much more - the jar of meal is not empty, nor has the jug of oil failed.

**[STEP 3]**

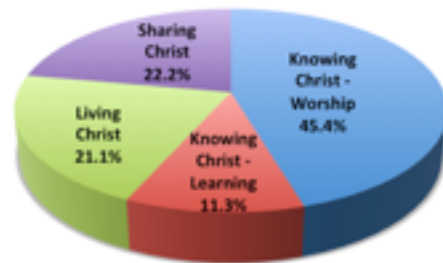
Last year, you were asked to step up your financial giving. You did. Has it made a difference? Yes. A year ago our income-expense balance was -\$7214.31. At the end of October this year our year-to-date income-expense balance was \$-801.82. That's an \$8000 increase in giving from last year. This is the first time this year that the year-to-date balance is on the negative side. My prayer is that we will work together to change that negative balance to a positive balance.

Above and beyond your giving to the general fund, you have given \$41,150 this year to send 9 youth and 3 leaders to the ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, complete repairs to the church building, renovate the bathroom at Red House, and support the LOAF fund in providing emergency assistance to members and neighbors in need. Thank you for stepping up in faith!

Next Sunday we will gather for a Thanksgiving Brunch to give thanks to you for your generosity. It really is the gifts of your time, talent, energy, and dollars that makes mission possible in this place. **[STEP 4]**

Next Sunday is also Consecration Sunday when we ask all our members to submit an estimate of giving for 2016. The bulletin insert is a tool to help you figure out where you are in your current level of giving, and how much you might be able to step up. Your estimates of giving enable our Finance Team to build an accurate and realistic ministry plan.

**[STEP 5]** This pie chart shows how every dollar of your contributions to the general fund this year is allocated for mission and ministry.



45.4 cents of every dollar is spent on making worship happen three times a week: 52% of our property expenses, salaries for music director and accompanist, a portion of the office manager, premise keeper, vicar and pastor's salaries, copyright and music licenses, worship supplies.

11.3 cents of every dollar supports our learning ministries: the costs of curriculum materials and supplies, 13% of our property expenses, and a portion of the vicar and pastor's salaries.

21.1 cents of every dollar goes toward supporting our members through our Living Christ ministries of hospitality, stewardship, pastoral care, Stephen Ministry, subscriptions to the Lutheran magazine, Christ in our Home devotionals, EWALU camper-ships for kids, producing the Messenger, eNews, and 50% of maintaining our website.

22.2 cents of every dollar is spent on sharing the good news of Jesus beyond our walls with and for people who are not and may never be members: the Southeastern Iowa Synod, the ELCA, World Hunger, Lutheran Services in Iowa, the Cedar River Conference, Family Promise, 65% of our internship expenses, supplies for the Visitor Center, hosting Boy Scouts, serving as a voting site, 50% of our website costs, and all advertising costs.

In 2016 we anticipate a \$10,000 increase in the Knowing Christ - Learning budget as we bring a part-time youth director on staff. We are currently in conversation with a couple of potential candidates. We have learned that the piano needs \$5,000 of upgrades. If we adopt the Council's 5 year strategic plan we will need to grow our Sharing Christ and Living Christ ministries a lot. How much and how quickly will depend on all of us, so we are all being asked to step up by God's grace. Trusting that our jar of meal and our jug of oil will not run out, John and I have determined to increase our giving in 2016 by 3%.

How is God calling you to step up?