

Widows. We have 3 mentions of widows in today's OT, Psalm, and Gospel lessons. Now when I think of widows, I usually think in modern 21st century American terms. The widows that I know probably wouldn't have chosen to have their husbands die. But for the most part they get along just fine. They have livable incomes from either their own financial resources or their late husbands' resources. And at St. Paul's we've had a number of widows who provide leadership and ministry in the church.

But when we see the word 'widow' in scripture, we need to throw out all of our modern ideas about what widowhood entails. Widowhood in Biblical times was vastly different.

In the extremely patriarchal climate of both Elijah and Jesus' day, women were almost always absolutely dependent on men. If a woman's husband died, and if she didn't have grown sons to take care of her, she basically had no place in society. The Hebrew word for 'widow' literally means "silent one" or "one who cannot speak." To be a widow in the Biblical world usually meant that one was extremely vulnerable, powerless, and living on the fringes of society.

Yet this morning, in our Gospel and OT lessons, we have 2 widows who are great examples of trust and faith.

From Mark, we heard story of the widow's mite. Jesus and his disciples are watching the rich make large donations to the temple treasury.

And not only are they watching the donations--they're hearing them as well. In the temple the offerings were thrown into metal trumpet-shaped funnels. It was kind of like those old toll booths that had a basket to throw your coins in, and then they would clink around and around as the machine counted them and decided whether to let you pass.

So in the temple, when metal coins are thrown into large metal funnels they would make a distinct noise. If people were making large offerings, you could hear them clank and clatter as they went down.

And then this poor widow comes along and puts in only 2 small copper coins. They wouldn't make a big sound. Just a tiny little clink-clink-clink as they funneled down.

Two small coins. Adjusted for inflation they are worth only about 75 cents in today's terms. It would hardly be enough for a Coke, or a can of soup or tuna, or a couple of cans of dog food. Yet this poor widow offers her last 3 quarters to God. And Jesus commends her: "Truly I tell you, this 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."

This widow trusts God completely. Most of us would probably keep at least one coin for ourselves, if not both of them. But she gives all she has. And Jesus praises her faithfulness.

In our OT lesson from 1 Kings we read of another nameless widow, the widow of Zarephath. Like the widow in the temple, she also makes a leap of faith and trusts God completely.

During a time of severe drought and famine, the prophet Elijah comes to her house and asks her for water and bread. She responds in poignant "you've got to be kidding" sort of way: "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal in a jar, and a little oil in a jug; I am now gathering a couple of sticks, so that I may go home and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die." It's a terribly poignant statement. She's almost out of resources, and she's ready to have one last pitiful meal before she and her son starve to death.

And yet, they don't die. God provides for the woman, her son, and the prophet Elijah. For as long as the famine and drought last, through the providence of God, the flour and the oil never run out.

Both the widow of Zarephath and the widow in the temple share something important in common. They both have to trust God completely. Neither has enough to live on, and yet they both offer all they have to God.

These widows provide important lessons for us.

Like those widows, we are called to trust God completely. This is often much harder for us to do, because we are so used to being self reliant. It's the American way. These 2 widows had very little, and they relied upon God totally. We have so much, yet we rely upon God very little.

In two-and-a-half weeks we will celebrate a big holiday in our culture: Thanksgiving Day. But for many, this day is no longer a holiday or "holy day." It is not an occasion to give thanks to God. Instead it is just "Turkey Day," a day to overeat and watch football. Taking time to render thanks to Almighty God is often left out of the celebration.

The modern attitude of thankfulness, or lack of thankfulness, is summed up by that American cartoon theologian Bart Simpson. When Bart is asked to say grace before a meal, he says, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing! Amen."

That's the spiritual danger for us. We pretty much view ourselves as self sufficient. God easily becomes an afterthought.

It's important question for all of us. How central is God in our day to day lives? To what extent do we put our trust in the living God?

We say, "In God we trust." We even put it on our coins. But is that really how we live our day-to-day lives?

When you look at the food on your table, do you truly see God providing for you? Or do you see it coming from Market Street, or your bank account?

When you look at your bank account, do you truly see God providing for you? Or do you see the fruits of your own labor and talents?

When you look at your talents, do you truly see God providing for you by creating you that way? Or are you just lucky that the dice have rolled the way they have?

It's a huge spiritual challenge for us. Do we recognize all of the good things in our lives as blessings from God? And are we truly thankful for them?

I recently saw a documentary that interviewed a large number of our newest American citizens--people born in foreign countries who went through the process to become Naturalized Citizens. And there was a theme they repeated over and over. They were surprised how most Americans didn't realize how good we had it, how we didn't realize how blessed we were.

In fact, they thought we complained a lot about minor things in the midst of living with incredible freedoms and material blessings. By contrast, they were all hugely thankful to be new citizens of our great country. They were thankful to now be living in conditions and with benefits that were far better than the countries they had been born in.

In the midst of such great freedom and blessing, are we truly thankful to God for all that he has given us? Do we truly acknowledge him providing for us?

There's a powerful question that's been floating around on the internet: "What if you woke up tomorrow with only the things you had thanked God for today?"

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That question encourages us to live with an attitude of gratitude. We need to thank God for all of the blessings he has given us and not take them for granted.

Like the widows in our scripture lessons, we need to trust God totally to take care of our needs. And we need to be thankful to God for all the blessings he gives us.

Perhaps it's no accident that the central act of Christian worship on Sunday is giving thanks. We not only offer praise and thanks to God with our songs and prayers. We also participate in the Holy Eucharist, a word that literally means "giving thanks."

I say to you, "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God." And you reply that that is the right and proper thing to do.

And then, a little later, you come forward. You come to the altar rail. You stretch out you empty hands. You acknowledge before God that you need what only he can provide. His grace. His blessing. His provision.

The LORD sustains the orphan and widow.  
The LORD sustains us.  
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.