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Proper 27B
Peace, Seattle
November 11, 2018
1 Kings 17:8-16, Mark 12:41-44

THE FATE OF WIDOWS

British Lieutenant Wilfred Owen, who slogged with his men through the muddy trenches of WWI and transmuted the experience into powerfully wrought lines of poetry, was killed in action at age 25, one week before the Armistice ending the war was signed.[1]

Listen, as he calls us into those trenches with him and his fellows in the opening stanzas of his poem, EXPOSURE:

> Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knive us . . .
> Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent . . .
> Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient . . .
> Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,
> But nothing happens.
>
> Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,
> Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.
> Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,
> Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.
> What are we doing here?

The casualties of that so-called Great War mounted into many millions, both military and civilian. And "the very nature of warfare...changed irrevocably. Empires crumbled, new nations arose and the world's maps were redrawn in ways that reverberate mightily a century later."[2]

"Will, or should, this commemoration of… Armistice Day…be the last on this scale?" asks Alan Cowell of The New York Times. "In today's world of shifting international alignments, uneasy alliances and growing nationalism," he writes, "World War I offers a reminder of how easily and unexpectedly an obscure spark can ignite a conflagration."[3]

British artist Rob Heard started reflecting about the loss and impact of WWI five years ago after a car accident reduced his ability to make the elaborate tree house carvings he was known for.[4]

"I had lots of surgery and…started thinking about people worse off than myself," he said, like British soldiers returning from war in Afghanistan.

"I focused on the Battle of the Somme – with 20,000 men lost on the first day. And I started to think of what that number really looked like. I just wanted to physicalise the number. I came up with this idea of making a [doll-sized] effigy…for every single one of the men who died…"[5]

At first Heard was focused on the enormous losses in that first day, but over time his goal for the project multiplied from 20,000 figures to 72,396 figures—the total number of British and Commonwealth servicemen who died on the Somme battlefields from 1916-1918 and who had no known graves.[6]

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[1] After his death, as his poems came more to light, he came to known as the best war poet of his generation. You can read a brief biography of Owen's life here: https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/wilfred-owen
[2] Alan Cowell, *World War I: Courage, folly and indelible scars.* *The New York Times*. Published in *The Seattle Times*, November 10, 2018, page A3.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ceylan Yeginsu, *Shrouds bring home heavy toll of WWI battle.* *The New York Times*. Published in *The Seattle Times*, November 10, 2018, page A3.
[5] Heard's website is found here: https://www.robheard.co.uk/
[6] *Shrouds* article. Op. cit.

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The display of the shrouded doll-sized figures, now complete, and laid out in symmetrical rows and columns, has transformed London's Olympic Park into a mass, open-air graveyard for this year's centennial commemoration.

A full one-third of the nearly 10 million soldiers killed or missing during the Great War left behind a widow,[7] and these women found their lives dramatically reshaped by their loss.

Kitty Eckersley, whose husband Percy died at Somme while she was seven months pregnant with their son, reflected years later on the emotional impact his death had on her.

> "I felt I didn't want to live. I had no wish to live at all because the world had come to an end for me. I had lost all that I loved."[8]

But the impact on these women was not just emotional, it was economic too. Men took home much higher paychecks than women, so the loss of a husband usually meant the loss of the family's main source of income.[9]

Some of these war widows were given a pension, but not all. A woman who married a soldier after he was discharged would not get a pension if he later died from war wounds. And some had their pensions withdrawn when they were judged to be behaving in the wrong way, for instance if they were accused of drunkenness, neglecting their children, living out of wedlock or bearing an illegitimate child.

Some Britons feared the pensions were too generous, and that widows who received them would be discouraged from supporting themselves. Widows who did not strictly follow public conventions around mourning ran the risk of being seen as unfaithful to their fallen husbands. It was an ambiguous position to be in, to say the least.[10]

Widows are front and center in the two stories from scripture before us today.
We know little of their back-stories. Were they, like Kitty Eckersley, surviving partners whose husbands had been killed in some conflict or another? Or had some other calamity claimed the lives of their men?

We can't be sure of their specific circumstances, but we can be sure that neither of them had a pension coming in; and that their options for survival were severely limited—dependent on the existence of an adult male son or relative who would take them into his home and provide for their needs.

There are reasons that Hebrew Scripture contains so many injunctions and commandments about the need to care for widows and orphans; first, because with the brutal realities of ancient times, there were so many of them around, and second, because their situation was so precarious.

The God who brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage demanded of Israel that they not lose sight of their experience; that they pay attention to the vulnerable ones in their midst lest they lose touch with their own story, and lest these widows and orphans become, over time, invisible to them.

But as we know, systems designed to insure that people at risk are properly cared for, even when codified in law, can be subject to manipulation; until the very thing they were designed to prevent becomes lost.

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[7] Peg Bette, *War Widows*. International Encyclopedia of the First World War. http://www.1914-1918-online.net/06_WWI_websites/index.html
[8] Imperial War Museum. https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/how-the-battle-of-the-somme-made-kitty-morter-a-war-widow
[9] See: https://www.mylearning.org/stories/how-the-first-world-war-affected-families/797
[10] Peg Bette, op. cit.

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As he teaches in the Temple during his final days, Jesus sharpens his critique of the Temple system to a knifelike edge. He wants everyone in earshot to understand the profoundly NEGATIVE EFFECT institutions can have on those who are most defenseless.

To paraphrase him:

> BEWARE OF THOSE WHO LIKE TO BE GREETED WITH RESPECT IN PUBLIC; WHO FOR APPEARANCES SAY ALL THE RIGHT WORDS, BUT BEHIND THE SCENES ARE TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE VERY PEOPLE THEY'RE SWORN TO CARE FOR.

IN A WORD: FOLLOW THE MONEY.

Since women were not legally or socially allowed to manage their deceased husband's affairs, when it came to the estates of widows it was common for trusteeships to be set up and managed by a third party. And who better to take on this role than a leader of the faith community?

The problem with this scenario was that greed often prevailed, and custodianship of this kind became rife with embezzlement and abuse.[11] It's this reality that connects the first half of today's gospel with the second.

As Jesus sits outside the treasury watching people put in their offerings, the gift of one poor widow catches his attention. And what he says next—often interpreted as an affirmation of sacrificial giving—is, in actuality, a critique**. Any system, he tells his disciples, that results in a widow like her giving all she has to live on while leaders live lives of wealth and privilege, is morally bankrupt.[12]**

Now Mark, in telling this story, doesn't take us inside this woman's head, so we're not able to see the true motivation behind her giving.

Is it pure obligation that moves her to put her last two coins in the plate? Or is there a part of her that remains untouched by the corruptness of the system—a place within her that trusts the Torah's claim that Adonai's divine image resides within her too?

If so, then perhaps it is out of this place, a place of gratitude and not just obligation, that her offering comes forth. The truth is, we don't know.

What we do know is that she—like so many others throughout the gospels—is visible to him. Jesus sees her. And because he sees her, we see her—and tell her story still. And each time we tell it his warning is renewed: TAKE CARE OF WIDOWS SUCH AS SHE, FOR I CARRY THEM CLOSE IN MY BOSOM; YES, THEY BELONG TO ME.

There are others, too, whose stories we still tell—and must. Like the widow at Zarephath who in feeding Elijah in his time of need kept both herself and her son alive.

And the stories of other widows who, like Kitty Eckersley, lost husbands in the trenches of World War 1 and on every battlefield since—are losing them now. Their stories must be told because the terrible cost war continually exacts on those who survive it should never be forgotten. Let us pray...

PRAYER: O God, it is your will to hold both heaven and earth in a single peace. Let the design of your great love shine on the waste of our wraths and sorrows, and give peace to your church, peace among nations, peace in our homes, and peace in our hearts; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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[11] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*. (New York: Maryknoll) 1988. Page 320-321.
[12] Rodger Nishioka, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B Volume 4. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) 2009. Page 284f.