Sunday February 23, 1975

"JESUS AND THE WIDOW" Mark 12:41-44

The passage just read from the Gospel of Mark is one of several stories in the New Testament about Jesus and a widow. Although in this particular story, Jesus is using the widow and her gift as an example of extraordinary generosity, we know from all of these incidents that Jesus had a special concern for widows and their situation.

And there are other places in the Bible where special mention is made of widows. In spite of this, studies show that in the Israel of Jesus' day, widows were often discriminated against. Undoubtedly that's one of the main reasons Jesus had a special interest for them.

Widows wore special black clothing to mark their bereaved state. And unlike widows in many other cultures, they could not inherit from their husbands on his death. One reason for this neglect may have been that the Jews at that time believed that death before old age was a terrible calamity, possibly a judgment for sins committed, and the wife was included in this judgment. Thus being a widow meant not only bereavement and deprivation, but often disgrace.

Burdened with the reproach of being a widow, the Hebrew woman also lost much of her authority and well-being in society on the death of her husband. The eldest son inherited his father's goods and took over the management of the house. If the widow was childless, she usually returned to her father's house.

Added to this was the Hebrew law of levirate marriage which held that a widow could be married to the next youngest unmarried brother of her husband so as to keep her cared for by her husband's family. However, many times no brothers were available, or the man might refuse to take on this responsibility. Then the widow was left without economic security, not to speak of emotional satisfactions or social acceptance.

Basically, the status of the widow in Hebrew society revealed the bias of a patriarchal society where women were considered chattels and bearers of children and often something less than persons.

So, for the most part, widows were pre-eminently a disadvantaged group in the social circle of Jesus' day. And most of them were poor and at the mercy of society as a whole. Jesus, however, recognized their suffering as outcasts and responded to it as he responded to all those rejected by society or who suffered in any way.

We can now see why the widow in this particular instance in the Gospel of Mark, made such an impression on Jesus. Here was a person who received so little from the society around her and yet was willing to give to the temple beyond her means. Thus Jesus called attention to her generosity in spite of the harsh conditions of her life. He appreciated her act of extra-ordinary giving which came from so little.

In another story in the Gospel of Luke, we read of Jesus responding directly to the plight of a widow. Listen!

> Soon afterward, Jesus went to a city called Nain, and his disciples and a great crowd went with him. As he drew near to the gate of the city, behold a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow; and a large crowd from the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her and said to her, "Do not weep." And he came and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And Jesus said, "Young man, I say to you, arise." And the dead man sat up, and began to speak. And Jesus gave him to his mother. (Luke 7:11-15)

We can imagine the grief of the mother. She had first lost her husband and then her only child. Jesus did not offer words of comfort only. His understanding and sympathy were transformed into action as he brought the son to life. The widow's deep sorrow called forth an extra-ordinary act of compassion and restoration.

Some scholars have suggested that part of Jesus' special concern for widows came from the fact that his mother, Mary, was by this time a widow. There is no mention of Joseph in the Gospels after the visit to the Temple when Jesus was 12 years old, and some authorities have theorized that Jesus did not start his public ministry until he was about thirty years old because of his responsibility to his mother and brothers and sisters as the oldest son.

Whether this theory is true or not, we do now know for sure. What we do know is that Jesus always showed himself sensitive to the needs of widows in particular and understood the difficulties and deprivations of their condition.

Today, most would agree that the condition of widows is in most cases much better than it was in the days when Jesus lives. Most societies do not exclude widows from inheritance, in fact, the majority insist that a man's wife be provided for upon his death. The spectacular growth of the insurance industry and the benefits of social security have added to her support.

But problems still remain for widows, both in society at large and in the church. And so the story of Jesus and the widow, just like the story last week about Jesus and the woman who touched the hem of his garment, is more than just an incident of 2000 years ago. It's a story that causes us to consider the sitution of widows in our own time. And more than that, it's a story that leads us to examine -our relationship to all persons who have suffered a loss of some kind or other and who are alone in a special way.

First, there is the terrible sense of loss when the man whom a woman has chosen to live her life with, dies. It spells the end of her hopes and expectations of a normal sharing life. The same feeling of course will be true of a husband whose wife dies, but the fact is there are a great many more widows than widowers, as we shall see.

One woman who recently became a widow and then wrote a book about it, said: "After my husband died, I felt like one of those spiraled shells washed up on the beach. Poke a straw through the twisting tunnel, around and around, and there is nothing there. No flesh, no life. Whatever lived there is dried up and gone."

Then she went on to write -- "Our society is set up so that most women lose their identities when their husbands die. Marriage is a symbiotic relationship for most of us. We draw our identities from our husbands. We add ourselves to our men, pour ourselves into them and their lives. We exist in their reflection. And then. . . ? If they die. .? What is left? It's wrenching enough to lose the man who is your lover, the father of your children, without losing yourself as well."

Fortunately, for all of us, both men and women, there is positive change taking place. What is happening is illustrated by a marriage vow which many couples now ask be made a part of their ceremony. It goes, "I _____ promise that I will strengthen and support you_____ by sharing by joys and fears, and at the same time in patience and trust give you room to grow and the freedom to be your own self." The vow is said by each person in the marriage.

To find most of our identity or our total identity in the life of another person is not healthy for any one of us. Some parents find too much of their identity in their children and then when the child leaves home and is on his own, their lives fall apart.

2. The second problem in our time is that in our society death parts women from their spouses more often and earlier than it does men. One out of every six women in this country over the age of 21, is a widow. And the statistics collected by the Bureau of the Census show that women are becoming widows at younger and younger ages. More than 70% of men over 65 are married, compared to 30% of the women. We have at least 110 women members of this church who are widows.

3. The third problem which is related to the increasing number of young widows is that besides her life alone, she must face the responsibility of bringing up her children if she has any, without a father. It is usually a difficult job for two active concerned parents to bring up their children, and when a person faces it alone, the task is awesome.

4. A fourth problem, as one widow wrote, is that as a widow and therefore a single person, she felt excluded from much of society that she had formerly been a part of. At once extreme, she said, she was excluded from parties as a single woman in a coupled society; and at the other extreme, much to her embarrassment, her friends were constantly trying to play matchmaker.

Actually for our purposes in our time in the church and in society, the treatment which Jesus gave widows should be instructive for us as far as our sensitivity and relationship to all single people.

Because of divorce and other problems, many people today become single parents even though their former spouse may

not be dead. And as single parents, they face many of the same problems as widows. We've not yet learned enough how to include such people in our churches and in society as a whole.

The least we can learn as Christians from the encounters which Jesus had with widows is that such people, including all single parents need to be included as persons in our society and churches. WE've got to remember that all of society is not two by two.

And for those of us who are married there are some other practical things we can do as well. In her book, entitled "WIDOW" Lynn Caine, tells her own personal story and one of the things she recommends is that all couples at least once a year have a "contingency day." Death is the one thing we know for sure is going to come to all of us, and yet it is also the one thing we often do least to prepare for.

A "contingency day" therefore, is simply a time we set aside each year in which we talk openly and frankly about what will happen when either of the parties in a marriage dies. We would ask such questions as: How much money would the surviving spouse and children have to live on? Should there be more life insurance? Do each of the partners in the marriage have knowledge about the mortgage, and other legal matters? Is the will of each person up-to-date? And there are many more questions that need to be discussed on such a "contingency day." The point is we can do a lot more than most of us do to prepare for events which may come upon us.

In addition, as Christians we have the responsibility to see to it that each person, widow, widower, single parent, divorcee, single person, married person, has an identity of all its own. When two people come to a marriage, each with his or own secure identity then the marriage can even be strengthened. Then too, when one of the partners in the marriage dies, life can be rebuilt.

As one young widow has written, we can even come out on the other with a new strength. Listen to her own words --

> "Widow can be a harsh and hurtful word. It comes from the Sanskrit and it means "empty." I have been empty too long. I do not want to be pigeon-holed as a widow.

I am a woman whose husband has died, yes. But not a second-class citizen, not a lonely goose. I am a mother and a working woman and a friend and a laughing woman and a concerned and a vital woman. I am a person. I am alive. I am part of the world.

If I had died instead of my husband, I would expect him to be very much part of the world. I am not rejecting the love, the warmth, the tenderness and the passion I had for my husband. Grief is as much a lament for the end of love as anything else. Acceptance finally comes and with it peace. Today I am stronger, more independent. I have more understanding, more sympathy. A different perspective.

Jesus must've sensed this strength in widows even in his own time and he liked what he saw. Hopefully, we too can see widows, single parents and all people in the same way. Amen.