



ALL SAINTS CHURCH  
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

### **The Resourcefulness Of Emptiness**

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Edwin Bacon, Jr.  
November 8, 2009

Widowhood is the starting point for our reflections this morning. Both the gospel and the Hebrew Scripture lesson appointed for today focus on widows. Scripture contains an important life lesson for all people about living with God and one another when we understand the biblical message symbolized by widowhood.

Widows, along with orphans and strangers are mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, often times together, as a special category of humanity God cares for and calls you and me to care for. In the Bible you cannot be an effective advocate for justice without spirituality undergirding your justice work and you cannot have a healthy spirituality without it leading you to courageous and imaginative advocacy for justice and peace. There is an economic justice reason for God's care and God's peoples' care for widows, orphans and immigrants (sometimes referred to in the Bible as "aliens" or "strangers."). In biblical times, widows, orphans, and immigrants could have no property of their own and there was no existing social structure to look after them. The biblical hallmark of someone being a person of God and certainly the biblical hallmark for a community being a people of God was that they cared for widows, orphans, and immigrants. Likewise, the defining characteristic of those who are wicked in the Bible are that the wicked do not care for widows, children without parents, and those without a homeland. (Psalm 94:6) One of the great hallmarks of the desire of All Saints Church to be people of God is the care with which we attend to those who are bereaved, the strength of the Foster Care Project here and the number of adults who adopt children in the Foster Care System both locally and abroad, to bring them into their own families, and of course the importance of our standing in solidarity with immigrants calling for comprehensive, compassionate policies for those who are without documents in our country.

The Greek word for "widow" is taken from a root word meaning "to be empty." Another meaning of that Greek root word is "chasm." Everyone who has a chapter of their life in which they are deprived of a beloved spouse or partner, or deprived of a parent or family, or who suffers from the loss of their country knows a common aching emptiness that is a part of the human condition.

This brings to my mind of course the horrible wars going on throughout the world and the violence that killed 13 people at Ft. Hood this past week. Most of us can only imagine the aching void left in the hearts and lives of family members of those killed in the horrible massacre at Fort Hood as well as the friends and family of the alleged shooter, wondering what happened in his mind to will such a heinous act of violence.

Veterans Day is tomorrow in our country and on the eve of that observation Max Cleland, former U.S. Senator from Georgia, who fought in Vietnam wrote in Saturday's New York Times newspaper the following: "The first time I saw the stilled bodies of American soldiers dead on the battlefield is as stark and brutal a memory as the memory of the grenade that ripped off my right arm and both legs." "Every day I was in Vietnam, I thought about home. And, every day I've been home, I've thought about Vietnam." "That is the curse of the soldier. The soldier never forgets. No, the soldier never forgets. But neither should the rest of us. (Max Cleland, "The Forever War of the Mind, *the New York Times*, November 7, 2009)

Former Senator Cleland tells of the healing he has undergone for post traumatic stress syndrome forty years after losing his limbs. He dealt rather late with the phenomenon known as PTSD because when he fought in Vietnam, the military didn't even have the diagnosis, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Forty years after his injury, he went to "Walter Reed hospital, seeking counseling for post-traumatic stress disorder, which, ignited by a barrage of Iraq headlines and the loss of his United States Senate seat" as a result of a horrible campaign by the right wing. He said "that had simply consumed me." He went to the hospital and in his emptiness he found healing and energy to move forward with his life.

Cleland is not alone in telling stories of finding healing and empowerment in the midst of emptiness. It is as if there is resourcefulness, a mysterious resourcefulness for divine work within emptiness.

The prophet Elijah in the first lesson and Jesus in the Gospel lesson are trying to teach you and me something about the fact that God, Divine power itself, can enter into and empower you and me in those moments when we have become widows or orphans or foreigners – when we are visited by emptiness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran theologian who lost many friends and family members in WWII. He was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in NYC and rather than stay secure in the U.S. he went home to Germany, became a leader in the church that resisted Hitler, and he was eventually executed by the Nazis. He spoke of being inspired by his own emptiness from the loss of his friends. He called the emptiness "the gap."

He wrote in letters and papers from prison, "Nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us, it is an energy for us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain, and that is the source of our work." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison)

In preparation for these reflections this morning I spoke to several people in this community about their experiences of being widowed, of being emptied. I wish I could share all the amazing stories of dreams and prayers and visions that people have had in this chapter of their lives.

But I will share this: One friend wrote, “Being widowed was being forced into a place where my whole being was consumed by emptiness. It is an emptiness which is so vast and void of light, that I could not have navigated my way out of it. The only choice was to die completely or to allow God to give me the stuff of God’s choosing. It was as if God was breathing into me because I couldn’t breathe on my own, and because my emptiness made me utterly vulnerable and without form, turning my soul and body over to God without any reservation that made it possible for God to remake me – to create me whole and new. I never would have chosen this vulnerability, this loss of shape and form, but being forced to it by the death of my beloved, opened me to fully absorb God’s grace. This is my experience in every day now, the act of dying with every breath, in order to allow God to breathe into me the substance of life.”

I think that the reason God sent Elijah to the widow at Zarapheth and the reason God-made-tangible, Jesus, our leader focused on the widow in the temple who gave all that she had is that when you and I experience what both of these widows experienced in today’s lessons – of being made empty, that there is a way that emptiness becomes a resource for us of fully absorbing God’s Grace and of being fully and generously used by God for something we could not have heretofore imagined.

Now if we were in a Baptist church I would tell you all to take your Bibles and turn to 1 Kings 17:8-16. But I’ll do something more inclusive since I don’t think everybody has their Bibles with them. [laughter] I’ll read it to you.

God came to Elijah and said, "Go to Zarephath, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." So he set out and went to Zarephath and when he came to the gate of the town, there was a widow gathering sticks and he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, so that I may drink." As she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." But she said, "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." Elijah said to her, “Go and do as you’ve said but first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For God says the jar of meal is not going to be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail.” Now I have checked out the Hebrew (tongue in cheek) and at this point in the dialogue the widow said to Elijah, “Are you crazy, Jack?” [laughter] Then Elijah said, “Don’t be afraid.”

She went and did as Elijah said, so that she, he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied and the jug of oil did not fail. This human being in emptiness was caught in fear and isolation and this visitor helped her put away her fear and put away her isolation so that she could move forward like Max Cleland has moved forward and my friend who was widowed has moved forward and how your and I are called to move forward – even in our times of emptiness.

There is a prayer from an Iroquois ritual conducted at the end of a period of mourning. The culmination is the prayer that the person who has been made empty may also be emptied of “Whatever is keeping you from speaking the truth of the Creator.” (Iroquois prayer)

Last weekend a busload of All Saints members went to a youth detention center with our partner in San Diego, Mary Moreno Richardson. The entire Halloween Saturday was spent going down to that detention center and talking with undocumented minors from all over the world, who actually are functionally orphans, children emptied of their families which were broken apart by the U.S. immigration policy. Kids living in a detention center without their families.

One of the most poignant stories was from a young man who said, "I am from Honduras and all my life I've always been alone. From a very young age I've been responsible for myself. Now I'm here but still alone and have no one. But I've discovered in this detention center that there are lots of people here who are alone without their families and I get up every day wanting to help them."

In all world religions there is a central and common spiritual experience called *kenosis*, which means emptying. In the oldest Christian hymn we have which was included in Paul's letters to the Philippians, Jesus is described as emptying himself of his divine status to be on this earth as one of us. The emptying experience throughout all world religions is a prelude to feeling God's presence inside you, which some religious traditions call ecstasy – knowing that God is the one breathing through you so that the oil of your life and the meal of your life never give out.

There are two keys to transforming emptiness into ecstasy: to give up fear and to give up isolation. Healthy religion is about transformation. Healthy religion is always about changing and being even more than you were yesterday so that you can be an instrument of hope helping people move forward in ways that you could not have without the experience of God breathing inside of you. But in order for that transformation to take place we have to be willing to go through traumatic experiences like emptiness.

Today we baptize these children into this faith community which is committed to leaving the house of fear and moving to the house of love. Our commitment is to surrounding people with community so that they never feel alone. Our commitment is to whatever emptying experience we have to help one another move through that which keeps us from speaking the truth of the Creator that is within us.

With that commitment to have our own emptiness transformed, let us now stand and bring these children into our community.

Amen.