

The widow's hand

Here is a woman about to die with her child who still manages to love her neighbor as herself.

by [Heidi Neumark](#) in the [September 27, 2000](#) issue



Jan Victors, *Elijah and the Widow of Zarepath*, oil on canvas, 1640s.

Manny, the treasurer of our church, is often the bearer of grim tidings. When he brings me bad news it makes me think I should become a more aggressive fundraiser. But if I spend more time raising money, how can I be a pastor? And if I don't, how will we remain a church? How much longer can we go on like the widow of Zarephath?

I have been increasingly drawn to the story of this nameless widow, who appears in what biblical commentators refer to as the Elijah cycle, a series of stories vaunting the prophet's miraculous powers. God tells Elijah that a time of drought is at hand, a consequence of the nation's self-centered behavior under King Ahab. Elijah survives by drinking water from a brook and eating bread and meat delivered by ravens. But after awhile the brook dries up. At that point, God sends Elijah to the village of Zarephath and tells him that a widow there will feed him. He finds her as she's gathering firewood.

By all rights, this widow should be in worse shape than Elijah—she has to be one of those most affected by the drought. In a time of national crisis, her needs would be considered last, especially under the regime of the arrogant King Ahab. And indeed, when Elijah shows up and requests a drink, she is gathering sticks to warm a last supper for herself and her son. The woman wants to be hospitable, but when he asks for bread to go with the water, it's too much. She tells him that she's gathering wood to bake the handful of meal and bit of oil that's left for herself and her son, and that they will eat this meal and await death.

Then she hears another word: "Do not be afraid; go and do as you have said; but first make me a little cake . . . For thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the Lord sends rain upon the earth." She went and did as Elijah said, so that she as well as he and her household ate for many days. The jar of meal was not emptied, neither did the jug of oil fail (1 Kings 17:13-16).

Here is a woman about to die with her child, a mother unable to feed her little boy, who still manages to love her neighbor as herself. Yes, Elijah predicts the miracle, but she is the one who sets the miracle in motion by her trust and risky generosity. So why is this story part of the Elijah cycle—why is the widow only a backdrop to show off Elijah's powers?

Perhaps because Elijah is the same male prophet who triumphs in the glitzy showdown with his opponents, the prophets of Baal. In that story, before Elijah calls down fire on a mound of lumber, his servants soak the wood with jars of water. The wood is thoroughly drenched and then catches fire. In contrast to this megamiracle, all the poor widow does is set fire to a few sticks in order to cook a little cake.

Yet I can't help but think that her wood is well soaked too. She is the mother of a little boy who came into the world gleaming with her blood, a little boy she nursed, rocked, bathed, soothed, fussed over and taught to walk. I don't imagine that she prepared her child's last supper with dry eyes. I think that the sticks she gathered were wet not from jars filled by servants, but from tears. Surely the wood was immersed in the waters of her grief when hope caught fire and she baked the bread and shared supper with Elijah.

This story never appears in our church's assigned cycle of Sunday readings. Instead we get the installment in which Elijah raises a widow's son from the dead. In that story the woman is portrayed as dependent on Elijah's miraculous power; she is a guilt-ridden sinner who sees her son's illness as God's punishment. Why are the lectionary editors more comfortable with the second story?

Those of us who are part of the white, middle-class church need to be careful that the poor do not become a backdrop for our charity. We must take care that quotas and programs and conferences on women, children and poverty do not become a forum for displaying our goodness and compassion while the church goes about other business dry-eyed and silent. I need to be careful that the poor are not the backdrop for my own good deeds. Pastors, priests and official prophets (mostly white) are cast as miracle-working Elijahs for the poor (mostly not white). It's not only racist and wrong, it's impossible. Most of us can't keep up megamiracles for long.

There is no point in romanticizing poverty. There is, however, a point in recognizing the power of those who fight for life and bear witness to a death-defying hope. We could say that Elijah, the male prophet, does this and therefore deserves the spotlight in the lectionary text. After all, he raises someone from the dead. But the widow raises a child—without a husband, without a safety net, without welfare or workfare. She does it in a time of idolatrous national arrogance, famine and drought. Raising the dead requires a single act of trust and prayer from Elijah. Raising a child requires countless acts of trust and many prayers, especially for a single mother.

The story of the widow of Zarephath brings to my mind the story of Burnice, a single mother who'd dropped out of school when her first baby came along. A series of men battered her, just as her alcoholic father had done. She sought relief in beer and crack, and ended up selling her body to get more. She moved to the Bronx to escape an abusive husband, but she couldn't get away from drugs.

One day, after dropping off her children at school, Burnice came by my office. She'd heard that we give out Christmas gifts to children. Burnice's plan was to pick up presents for her children and then sell the presents to buy enough drugs for an overdose. She told me later that she was sick and tired of being sick and tired. On Christmas morning, she came to get the gifts and met our intern Janell. Janell saw something in Burnice's face that made her stop and invite conversation, listening and prayer. When I noticed them, they were sitting in a wordless, tearful embrace. Burnice later said Janell's tears opened her heart.

Burnice came back for our women's Bible study. We focused on women whose messed-up lives had issued forth miracles. Hagar, Tamar, Ruth, Rahab and many others are not prominent in our tradition, but their stories resonate with marginalized women. She asked if she could detox by sleeping in the church and we agreed. She slept on the rug by the altar and made it through that first week clean. By Easter, she was baptized.

Burnice began to help other women, reaching out to addicts as they hit bottom and listening and counseling them into detox and rehab programs. Her own relationship struggles continued. One man she'd been with broke her ribs. The next one was unfaithful. Hoping to hold him closer, Burnice became pregnant. Twice. The apartment they shared became infested with rats. When city officials did not respond to the situation, Burnice took her children to a shelter.

She went through training and found a part-time job as an HIV/AIDS outreach worker and met her future husband. But before long, he began using crack. Later she found that he'd infected her with the HIV virus.

Still, Burnice did not give up. She began working on a GED in preparation for a full-time job. She serves as the president of our congregation. "From crackhead to council president," she likes to say, "Transfiguration has made a transformation in me."

On Sundays, she stands before the altar holding out bread to share with all who come to receive it from her hands. Just as Elijah received the bread of life from a widow who defied the certainty of death, we come to take the bread of life from Burnice, a woman who defies doomsday statistics, offering counsel and comfort, leadership and challenge, even when her heart is near collapse.

Look closer at the Elijah cycle and you'll see that the open hand of a widow in Zarephath keeps the cycle spinning. I see it every day. The hands of women like Burnice who reach out to others in spite of closed doors, in spite of drought, are the hands that nurture life and witness to grace.