

One of the hardest things people go through is the death of a spouse. A typical marriage has bad times as well as good, but couples who stick it out love one another deeply and would not have it any other way. When you love someone, you carry that person in your heart every day. While you both live, the person you love brings you joy and strength. If that person dies, he or she is still in your heart every day, but the memory can bring you sorrow. To lose your spouse is to lose your heart.

Surely God has compassion on widowers as well as widows. But the bible shows surprisingly little concern for men who lose their spouse. I guess they were just expected to find another one and move on. But women who lose a husband – the bible really cares about them. In those days, a widow lost her heart, which is serious, but she also lost her only source of income, protection, and identity. Without a husband, she was in danger of starving and losing her possessions. As annoying as purse-snatchers and scam artists are today, they were devastating in biblical times. If you were old and weak, you were a candidate for poverty and sickness. It was rough being a widow in those days.

Both the first reading and the gospel today concern widows; and these two don't seek pity for themselves – they take pity on others. In the first reading, a widow prepares food for Elijah the prophet, and he rewards her with a jar of flour that does not go empty and a jug of oil that never runs dry. Even though she had lost her husband, she took care of God's prophet, and God took care of her. In the gospel, Jesus praises a widow who gives two copper coins to the Temple treasury. She owned only a little, but she gave it to those who had less. She becomes an example of discipleship: the willingness to give it all, all your resources for the sake of the gospel, no matter how little you have. In both cases, widows attracted God's attention. They gave a lot although they had lost a lot, so God was not going to lose them.

Today's responsorial psalm is chosen because of these two stories. It isn't very clear from the refrain we sang, "Praise the Lord, my soul!" but in the last verses we hear this about God: "The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts." God takes care of the widow. And God does even more: The LORD keeps faith forever, secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets captives free, gives sight to the blind, raises up those who were bowed down, loves the just and protects strangers. God takes care of the people the rest of us are tempted to ignore. That is why we sing, "Praise the Lord, my soul!" We see the good things God does on behalf of the needy, and then we realize we should do the same. We are blessed not when we have much, not when we lose much, but when we give much.

Sometimes when we suffer a great loss, we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us. Paradoxically, though, it is when we are low that God lifts us up. God expects us to care for others no matter what we've lost. Then God will take care of us, too.