

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 5, 2021**

**“Upholds the Orphan and the Widow”
Psalm 146**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Our Psalm in Unison begins and ends in praise—and what moves the psalmist to praise here is God’s compassion for the vulnerable, the overlooked, the poor, the persecuted. The psalmist sings of God

“who executes justice for the oppressed;

who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down [...].

The LORD watches over the strangers;

He upholds the orphan and the widow” (vv. 7-9).

This is a song about God’s care for those who are pushed down, beaten down, kept down: God, the psalmist celebrates, cares for “the oppressed,” for “the hungry,” for “the prisoners,” for those “bowed down,” and also—and this will be in focus in my sermon—the psalmist sings of God who “upholds the orphan and the widow.”

In the Bible, “the orphan and the widow” are frequently named as examples of people who are left unprotected. In the world of the Old Testament, in the context of ancient economies and societies, being an orphan or a widow could mean being left without financial resource or legal recourse: it could mean becoming isolated, vulnerable, dependent, at the mercy of others who could either help or harm.

So in the Bible, orphans and widows are remembered as people left without much-needed advocates, those without adequate protection or defence... And so God—out of the fullness of God’s mercy and compassion—takes the side of those who have no one on their side: God declares Godself to be their Advocate, their Protector, their Defender. As we hear in one passage of the Old Testament: “[T]he LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, [...] who executes justice for the orphan and the widow” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Similarly, in the passage from the Psalms that I selected as our Call to Worship in Unison this morning, we recited: “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation” (68:5). God makes orphans and widows God’s own concern: God’s places them in God’s own care.

And, as the Advocate of the orphan and the widow, God demands their protection.

Accordingly, in the Old Testament, we find commands such as this, from Exodus: “You shall not abuse any widow or orphan” (22:22); and this, from Deuteronomy: “You shall not deprive [...] an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge” (24:17). Those are prohibitions, “thou shalt nots,” which forbid the abuse of orphans and widows; the Old Testament also includes positive demands, “thou shalt” as it were, as God commands practices

that provide for the care of the widow and the orphan. For instance, God commands sharing a tithe of produce (that's 10%) in order that, as we read in Deuteronomy, "the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill" (14:29).

At the same time, Holy Scripture makes clear how gravely wrong it is to abuse the most vulnerable, to exploit the orphan and the widow. In Jeremiah, for instance, we hear a warning to "do no wrong or violence to [...] the orphan and the widow" (Jeremiah 22:3). To give you a sense of the gravity of this transgression in the Bible, at one point Moses invited priests to say together with one voice, "Cursed be anyone who deprives [...] the orphan, and the widow of justice" (Deuteronomy 27:19). This is searing stuff. God calls for the protection of orphans and widows, and so the sight of orphans and widows being abused—this pushes prophets to a sort of holy anger, a pious fury—and we hear words of judgment against those who harm the most vulnerable. In Malachi, for instance, we hear this: "I will draw near to you for judgment: I will be swift to bear witness against [...] those who oppress [...] the widow and the orphan," [...] says the LORD of hosts" (3:5). In the Bible, when the poor and marginal are oppressed, the prophets rage and rail against the injustice, giving voice to the judgment of the God who takes the side of orphans and widows.

And I wonder, could the church today find new ways to share in this indignation at the mistreatment of the marginalized, and so be moved to share actively in God's concern for the widow and the orphan, for the marginalized, for the oppressed, and the overlooked? Christian communities today have, for one, a financial responsibility, to be generous in supporting those who care for the orphan and the widow today. At the denominational level, think of Presbyterian World Service and Development, which continues to do exceptionally important work; at the congregational level, think of the many organizations that New St. James financially supports and assists locally, nationally, internationally (as just one example, through the Mission and Social Action Committee).

And in addition to financial generosity, churches today can always imagine new and creative ways to make a difference for the orphan and the widow. What's required is to look at the gifts God has given us, and to look around at who the orphans and the widows are today, and then ask: how can we use the gifts God has given us to support these orphans and these widows...whoever they may be? Today the orphans and the widows are around in many forms: victims of human trafficking, people fleeing violence, seniors living in poverty, all these people and many more.

I'd like to offer just one example of a Christian who accepted God's call to tend to vulnerable people, who saw the orphans and the widows around him and took action. Father Emmett Johns was a Roman Catholic priest in Montreal. He was born in 1928, served a long time as a parish priest—and then, in 1988, after decades of ministry, when he was 60 years old, he sensed a call to help homeless youth in Montreal. He said, I'd "been working with young people all my life. But [...] I [suddenly] realiz[ed] [...] there were [...] youth out there who were caught up in such miserable circumstances that they'd lost all hope for a better life." He reflected, "It just kind of came to me: I should be with the kids—I should help them."

So he did something about it: he didn't say, "What a shame" and move on; he didn't say, "I'm retiring: that's a problem for the next generation." He took action: "He borrowed \$10,000

[...], [he] bought a used motorhome and took to the streets, working long, sometimes lonely shifts from 9 pm to 3 or 4 am. 'I was kind of scared sometimes,' [he says], 'driving that big van around downtown late at night.'" But as Father Johns (or 'Pops,' as the homeless youth affectionately called him) continued in his ministry, he and his motorhome "quickly became fixtures of Montreal's nightscape, known to street kids as a safe place to get a bite to eat and warm up." As we heard last Sunday from the Letter of James: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress" (1:27)—and that's exactly what he did in Montreal, caring for the vulnerable in their distress.

Pops gave this mission a name: he called it, 'Le Bon Dieu dans la rue': 'The Good Lord in the street.' It didn't take a massive amount of resources to get started, but what it did require was a bold willingness to hear God's call to care for the most vulnerable, and to act. God calls us to care for those on the margins, "the orphan and the widow" of our time, and Pops was just one Christian who responded to that call: he chose to take a chance—financially, professionally, personally—but he did it! And now, all these years later, the mission he started continues to do wonderful work. I find it deeply inspiring that Pops listened to the call God laid upon his life—and acted to care for the vulnerable. It makes you wonder what Christians could accomplish today—when Christians have courage to act, to take a risk for the sake of the vulnerable, and share in God's love for the vulnerable.

And that's key: when the church serves the vulnerable, the church is joining with God who has a heart for the margins: God the Father declared Godself the Defender of the vulnerable, God the Son came as One who was vulnerable in Christ, and God the Holy Spirit remains alongside the vulnerable today. When Christians go to the margins, we go with the promise that God is always already there: "The LORD," says the psalmist, "upholds the orphan and the widow" (v. 9), and God calls us to find ways to join in God's care for the most vulnerable. Amen.