

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What sustains our vision of the Gospel? I find this to be an urgent question.

Everywhere we look, “terror is all around.”¹

- Economic catastrophes batter the poor before our eyes, like storms thrashing an island in hurricane season.
- Racism shrouds our vision like the smoke of a wildfire, burning embers of hatred whirling on every draft of wind.
- Gun violence takes yet more precious lives; grief blurs our sight, our cries a litany of lament: “Pulse nightclub! Parkland! The Tree of Life synagogue! Thousand Oaks!”
- Migrants are abandoned in the southern desert; tears flood our eyes as survivors struggle on through the waterless terrain of death itself, trying to get to safety.²

These horrific realities distort our vision of the world God so loves.

What can help us see the Gospel?

We need an icon to help us see the vastness of God’s love,

to glimpse the deep purpose of living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

To what should we look?

Well, worship helps us see the Gospel. That's why I'm so glad to worship with you this morning, to sing and pray with you at this magnificent altar where together we claim and proclaim the *mercy* of God in Christ.

Art can help us see the Gospel. I'm grateful for the Chinese immigrant artist He Qi, whose brightly colored icons of Gospel scenes such as *Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet* and *The Crucifixion* teach us about authentic Christian community—real, idiosyncratic, and appealing. I'm also grateful for Nora Valdez, the artist whose stone sculptures, such as “Motherhood” in the narthex here,³ explore memory and erasure, struggle and resilience in the immigrant experience. Other astonishing stone sculptures by Valdez grace the chapel in your undercroft—I hope you'll go down and take a look.

Education, too, helps us see the Gospel. Important to me is the witness of Howard Thurman—African American theologian, educator, civil rights activist, and former dean of the Chapel at Boston University, less than two miles from here. Thurman has helped me learn about the struggles of the disenfranchised—folks treated as outsiders in their own communities, folks victimized by prejudice and crushed by economic injustice. Where I might say, “Life is beautiful—brimming with opportunities for spiritual formation and chances to participate in God's unfolding mission” (and I do believe that), Thurman says,

“I have learned that life is hard, as hard as crucible steel.”⁴

Words from his 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Thurman reflects on the horrors of slavery and the Jim Crow era, when so many African Americans were treated with unspeakable cruelty and violently *erased* from the White supremacist cultural narrative. “Life is hard, as hard as crucible steel”: a lament that, tragically, is as relevant now as it was in Thurman’s day, seventy years ago. These days, White-nationalist groups are increasingly bold in fomenting hate. Racialized violence against black and brown persons is a daily occurrence. Newly arrived refugees and immigrant residents alike are demeaned and threatened. Migrants fleeing brutality arrive at our borders only to be subjected to drastically inhumane treatment.

This is, of course, nothing new. For thousands of years, life for countless people has been “hard as crucible steel.” Thurman’s words could have been keened by Ruth the Moabite centuries before the birth of Christ. The biblical story of Ruth is a story of survival, yes, and we can be inspired by that. But it’s survival at a terrible cost. Three women—Naomi of Judah and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth of Moab—have lost their husbands. Orpah goes back to her Moabite family, but Naomi is returning to Judah, and Ruth clings to her. You know the verse: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.” So beautiful—Ruth the idealist! But once Naomi and Ruth are back in Judah, things are less than idyllic. Ruth is marked over and over again as a foreigner: “Ruth the Moabite ... Ruth the Moabite ... Ruth the Mexican ... Ruth the Guatemalan.” Naomi sets Ruth to work in the fields, at

extreme risk of assault—the Bible says this outright ^{Ruth chapter 2}—and Naomi doesn't even bother to warn her. Ruth works all day long, “without resting even for a moment”—the model of the exploited immigrant who gives all that she has, working harder than anyone else just to be allowed to remain in the community.

In our lesson this morning, Naomi instructs Ruth to seduce a wealthy landowner in order to gain economic security. Again at considerable risk of violence, as all sex workers are, Ruth succeeds in seducing the man. They have a child ... and Naomi takes the child as her own. Ruth is erased, literally never mentioned again. Her labor—in the fields and in childbirth—has been appropriated without apology. The immigrant Ruth is praised when she does what benefits those in power; she's rendered invisible the rest of the time.

“Life is hard, as hard as crucible steel.”

Words that could have been whispered by a poor widow making her way to the Temple in first-century Jerusalem. Centuries after Ruth, not much has changed. The authorities continue to exploit and erase the poor from the social landscape—“devouring widow's houses,” as Jesus acidly comments. Our Lord watches as donors put large sums into the Temple treasury. He's not dazzled by the ostentatious wealth of the powerful. He's not blinded by social status. No, Jesus *sees what matters*. He watches as the poor widow puts in two thin copper coins—a tiny amount. No one else notices, but Jesus sees the *Gospel power* of what she offers.

Others contributed “out of their abundance, but she in her poverty put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”⁵

And Jesus sees her! He sees the kin-dom of God unfolding in the offering of this poor widow who gives *everything she has* for the transforming work of God.

Where corrupt leaders see a risible lack of influence, a “welfare” case, where they see despicable need and powerlessness—

Jesus sees radical discipleship:

a woman living the compassion of God!

The oppressive structures of the Temple will be dismantled—“not one stone will be left ... upon another”⁶—but this poor widow shows us how to build something else: an enduring community of compassion.

This weekend your church is hosting a marvelous symposium on immigration. I used to work in refugee services for the International Institute of Boston, as it used to be known, back when it was on Commonwealth Ave. between Gloucester and Hereford. The work was life-changing. I saw case managers who worked tirelessly to help refugees with resettlement, job placement, and English learning. I saw how passionately legal services staff defended the rights of newcomers from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Ethiopia, Haiti—folks who’d arrived in Boston, in some cases, with just the clothes on their backs.

But that's not all I saw. I saw depression and signs of trauma, confusion and fear, grief and simmering conflict as frightened families tried to figure out who they should be in this strange and foreign place.

- I saw the quiet anger that enveloped a Vietnamese woman when she shared what she'd endured at the hands of pirates as she fled Vietnam by boat—and I saw her core-deep compassion fight its way back through those terrible memories when she smiled and turned to help other refugees.
- I saw the agony of a Cambodian mother who, at 8 months pregnant, had guided her young children through the jungle for days, past venomous snakes and land mines, to get to Thailand. They got through—a miracle; all praise to God—but later she'd had to leave her elderly mother in a refugee camp in Thailand because her mother was not cleared to travel. Her sobs of anguish ring in my ears to this day—an impossibly courageous woman *devastated* by the choice she'd been forced to make.

Our national discourse is vicious about who “doesn't belong.”

We're barraged by narrow, pathological views of what community should be.

Friends, we have a choice, as Christians, about how we see the Gospel.

Do we dehumanize those fleeing from contexts of brutality and threat?

Do we turn away from their pleading eyes and outstretched hands?

Or do we see them for who they are: precious ... beloved ...

courageous people who've surrendered everything they have
to find a community of compassion—*this* community of compassion.⁷

Today I give you the **poor widow** as our icon of the Gospel:

the Moabite widow Ruth, faithful despite being relentlessly exploited,
and the widow at the Temple who gives *all that she has*,

who lives the compassion that is our vocation as Christians.⁸

Jesus called each one of us when *we* were strangers.⁹

None of us earned God's grace. Not one of us earned the blessings we enjoy!

We're sinners.¹⁰ Yet we are loved.

Our job—our *only job* as Christians—is to show that same love to others.

In the name of the One who is the fount of every blessing,

whose name is Love:

Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

11 November 2018

Proper 27B

Ruth 3:1–5; 4:13–17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24–28; Mark 12:38–44

Preached at Trinity Church in Copley Square, Boston, Massachusetts,

in conjunction with their 2018 Anne Berry Bonnyman Symposium on the
 theme, *Love Thy Neighbor: Equity in Immigration*

¹ “Terror all around” is a refrain (מִגּוֹר מְסָרִיב) that occurs in Jeremiah (6:25; 20:3, 10; 46:5; 49:29). The refrain expresses dread at the looming threat of military violence and fierce conflict within the Judean community as the Babylonian army approaches Jerusalem. Within Jeremiah’s oracles against the nations, it is applied to Egypt and Hazor as well. The harms perpetrated on a vast scale by unbridled militarism and global systems of economic oppression make the Jeremianic refrain all the more applicable today.

² Informative and heartbreaking is the piece by Joyce Hollyday, “Preyed Upon: Migrants and Their Predators Along the Border,” *Christian Century* 135/23 (November 7, 2018): 10-11.

³ Trinity Church has mounted a sculpture exhibition entitled “We Are Here” by [Nora Valdez](#), an immigrant from Argentina who has been sculpting stone since 1985. Valdez has lived in Brazil, Spain, and the United States, creating sculptures all over the world, including in Peru, China, Hong Kong, and New England. In an interview [here](#) in September 2018, Valdez said, “Art is a universal language that empowers and shapes communities.... In [recent] years my work has focused on the nature of home and the immigrant experience, recreating in my art the hard road of those caught within alien systems seeking the rootedness of home.” As worshippers enter the narthex of Trinity Church, they encounter a large stone figure of a woman with two children clinging to her. The woman’s attention is focused not on them but on something in the middle distance, perhaps an approaching threat. The 2013 piece is entitled “Motherhood.”

⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), 47. Thurman’s life (1899–1981) encompassed extraordinary challenges as he fought for social change, seeking to interrogate White supremacy and advocate for the economically and politically disenfranchised.

⁵ For historical background generally and an analogous circumstance related by Xenophon about Socrates, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 584-90. Via the catchword “whole,” Collins links Jesus’ answer to the scribe regarding the greatest commandment (12:28–34) with this story about the widow, offering, “The implication is that the scribe *knows* what the greatest commandment is, but the widow actually *fulfills* it.

By offering her last two coins to God ... she has demonstrated that she loves God ‘with her whole life’” (590).

⁶ Mark 13:2. The story of the poor widow is at the center of a chiasmic structure in which Mark points to the corruption of the Temple leaders and the future doom of the Temple, that religious and cultural center writ metonymically as edifice.

⁷ On Mark using the women characters in his Gospel to create and model a “community of solidarity” rather than hierarchical power relationships, see Johanna Dewey, “Women in the Gospel of Mark,” *Word & World* 26 (2006): 22-29.

⁸ On the poor widow as an exemplar for faithful living despite the cost, see R. Alan Culpepper, *Mark* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007, 429-30). Culpepper writes, “Like other minor characters in Mark (the paralytic’s friends, the woman with the hemorrhage, the father of the epileptic boy, and Bartimaeus), the widow is an exemplary figure. She is also a tragic figure. In her devotion, she has left herself destitute. Seen from this perspective, she is the final witness in the case against the temple. The chief priests and the Jerusalem scribes ‘devour widows’ houses’ (12:40). They have made the temple a ‘den of robbers’ (11:17; cf. 11:18). Now, God will destroy *their* ‘house.’” David Schnasa Jacobsen: “The alleged rapaciousness of the scribes in 12:39–40 and the lamentable action of a poor widow throwing her paltry remaining savings into the temple treasury are therefore twin examples of the corruption of the temple Jesus offers two examples of faithfulness, one negative and one positive. In the first, the religious leaders come up short yet again; in the other, the widow, we have one of the most powerful visions of the kind of discipleship that Jesus has been calling for all along.” See Jacobsen, *Mark* (Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 180.

⁹ From verse 2 of “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” our opening hymn this morning, with words by Robert Robinson (1735–1790), alt., #686 in the *Hymnal 1982* of the Episcopal Church.

¹⁰ Owning our sinfulness is a vital part of repenting and becoming more able to “walk in love” (Eph 5:2). Phillips Brooks, rector of Trinity Church from 1869 to 1891, offers that each of us is “a being whom Christ has forgiven”; to recognize this, he says, “is the only honest and the only hopeful way, the only way to know and be ourselves. When we have done that, then we are ready for the gospel, ready for all that Christ wants to show us that we may become....” See Brooks, *The Joy of Preaching* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989), 236-37; originally delivered as the Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School in January and February of 1877 and published as *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1877).