



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 1

Jesus Sees Women: An Adult Lenten Study

The Woman Who Lost Everything

Introduction to the Study

Throughout his life and ministry, raised and living in a culture where women were largely viewed as unimportant and unnoticeable, Jesus surprised—and often offended—in his interactions with women. He talked to, befriended, ate and celebrated with, and healed women. Jesus was essentially and revolutionarily *different* than others in his society in the way he saw women. Understanding this is essential to understanding the good news.

His approach with women raised suspicions, disgusted and offended, and put him and his followers at risk. And women, living in and oppressed by patriarchal systems from Jesus' time to today, continue to be drawn to the startling and life-giving good news of Jesus and the movement that emerged from his life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

Many Gospel stories about women and Jesus' encounters with them resemble life for marginalized women in parts of Africa and other places in the world today. Our experiences with some of these women while we have been teaching and serving in the African countries of Tanzania and Madagascar have changed

how we see women, their lives, and the impacts society lays on them. Our understanding of Jesus' relationship to women has changed. Throughout this study, you will find comments on the ways the Gospel stories relate to and resonate with the lives of women who continue to find Jesus' good news attractive and life giving.

In her essay "Upstream," American poet Mary Oliver wrote: "Attention is the beginning of devotion." In this study, we will pay close attention to six Gospel stories in which Jesus paid attention to and saw women. The Gospel writers chose not to include the names of these women, if they even knew them. Although the women are nameless in the text, the attention Jesus paid to them, his compassion for them, and his recognition of their inherent value is instructive to us as disciples. By studying how Jesus saw these women, we can pay better attention to both women and Jesus. Attention is a form of devotion, especially in this holy season.

The Woman Who Lost Everything (Luke 7:11–17)

We begin our Lenten journey traveling through Galilee with Jesus when he had a seemingly chance encounter with a woman engulfed with grief and loss and facing

a very perilous future. Because Jesus saw her and had compassion for her, her life was transformed.

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Jesus and his disciples came to the small town of Nain, and they were traveling with a large crowd. While the group was still outside the town, they met another large group taking part in a funeral procession. A dead man prepared for burial was being carried out of the town gate on a bier. The man's mother followed with a crowd of mourners. Luke notes that the dead man was his mother's only son and that she was a widow.

Women of any era would be consumed with grief, having lost both husband and son. If we knew a woman who had suffered such great loss in our time, we might develop a calendar with meal deliveries scheduled and noted times when members and pastors could visit. We might add the grieving widow and mother to the congregation's prayer list. We would look for opportunities to include her in community activities, to check in by phone, and to make sure she knew that the congregation was standing with her in this very difficult time.

But the woman of Nain was in a more serious situation than a grieving wife and mother might be today, as hard as it is to go on after overwhelming loss. As she walked with the crowd to bury her son, having already buried her husband, this widow was facing a very uncertain future.

Women in the Israel of Jesus' time did not own property nor have the right to inherit. The widow of Nain did not have a home to return to after the funeral. In fact, she had never had a home. Rather, she was granted the opportunity to live in the home her husband owned. When he died, their son, whom Luke tells us was the only son of the family, would have inherited the home. We can presume that the son granted his mother a place to live in the house he owned. After both men died, the home in which she had lived would go to those who had the right of inheritance.

The widow of Nain, walking with the crowd to bury her son, had nowhere to go after the services were

completed. She had been rendered homeless by the deaths of her husband and then of her son. Without a male relative to offer her housing, she no longer had a home. Women in this situation had limited options. Widows without a son, or whose sons had died, struggled for ways to survive. If they lacked a marketable skill, they could resort to begging, or they could become prostitutes. Many such women became ill from the strain of poverty and homelessness, and many died soon after the last male relative was buried.

So as she walked to the cemetery with the crowd to bury her son, the widow of Nain knew that her future was bleak. Everyone walking with her knew it too. Then Jesus saw her.

Luke 7:13 tells us, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her." Telling her not to weep, Jesus touched the bier, and the pallbearers stopped. "And he said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise!' The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother."

There are four stories of individual dead persons coming back to life in the Gospels: this story, the raising of Jairus's daughter, the raising of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Jesus. Each story is unique, and for those that appear in more than one Gospel, each Gospel writer tells the story differently.

This resurrection is different from the others, as this is the only resurrection that happens because of the life, and sure and certain impending death, of another person. Jesus had compassion on the widow of Nain, and when he raised her son to life, Jesus gave him to his mother. Jesus performed this miracle because of the compassion he had for the man's mother. She needed her son in order to go on living—without his life, her life would be over. Jesus saw this, and so he returned her son to life so that she could also live on. Jesus restored her life.

It is not that Jesus gave her son *back* to her or *returned* her son to her. The man, her son, was never hers. In Jesus' time, a woman's children were not her own. The children of a couple, like all property, belonged to the father. This is what made divorce so ruinous to women. Divorce, almost always initiated by men, resulted in devastating levels of loss for a woman. A divorced

woman lost a place to live, and if her father was not willing to take her back, she became homeless. On top of this, divorced mothers lost their children as well.

So in saying “Jesus gave him to his mother,” Luke stated something new. In this text, Jesus challenged and reversed, morally at least, the patriarchal system of laws regarding women and their children. From this point forward, the man, the son of the woman, who was not hers but her husband’s—that son was now her son, according to Jesus. Her relationship with her son would be transformed from a very limited bond to one that was life giving. Through this newly defined relationship, the son still belonged to his mother.

Finally, it is important to note the reaction of those who saw what had taken place. Witnesses are those who see and who give testimony of what they have seen. Luke shares that their first reaction to the miracle of resurrection was fear, great fear, which seized them (v. 16). Their second reaction was to glorify God and to testify to what they had seen throughout Judea and in all its neighboring regions. To see, for the witnesses, was both to become very afraid and to tell others. Jesus saw the woman and the situation that imperiled her. His actions led to others seeing her and sharing the good news about Jesus.

The Community Learns and Changes When Jesus Sees

What happened when Jesus saw someone? One clear response is that disciples in the community of faith started to see as Jesus saw. The New Testament retains evidence that the way the community treated widows changed because of what Jesus saw and did.

In Acts 6, there is a story of widows receiving food from the community. This was not part of religious practice before this new movement, which would come to be called the church, emerged. We remember this story primarily because it includes the first mention of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. From this story describing the earliest days of the church, we learn about how widows were seen within this new movement.

As it happens with some other stories in Scripture, we seem to be entering the narrative midstream—there is

much that has happened that has been left out, things the author might assume that we know. From what remains, we can draw some conclusions.

- A daily distribution of food, supported through the common sharing of possessions (Acts 4:32–37), began very early in the movement’s life—before this story happened. This was one strategy through which the early Christian community in Jerusalem ensured that there were no needy people in the community (Acts 4:34).
- Widows were among those who were cared for by the community through daily distribution of food. The community of Jesus’ disciples realized from its inception that widows were oppressed and poor. Caring for them had become a significant part of the work of the movement, important enough that it was included in Luke’s account of the life and ministry of the early church.
- The number of widows, both Hellenists (Greek-speaking) and Hebrews, was substantial. Seven men are chosen to serve them. The group of widows would not fit around one or two tables—they were many, and it would take a number of people to organize the work needed to serve them. We can say, then, that widows were attracted to this new movement in large numbers.

A clear and direct line can be drawn between the story in Luke 7 of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain and the story in Acts 6 of decision-making processes about how to deal with and resolve conflicts about food distribution for widows. When Jesus saw the grieving and homeless widow of Nain, a widowed woman had very little support from society. This shifted signifi-

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cantly, and widows received a lot of support from the early Christian community, in which feeding widows

was a daily part of the work of the church. When Jesus saw someone, the community of his followers learned to see them as well. They came to see people who were previously invisible and to act with compassion for those whom they saw.

Life for Widows in Tanzania

The story of the widow of Nain sounds familiar notes here in Tanzania. Widows are among the most oppressed and at-risk people in Tanzanian society. Tanzanian state law gives women the right to inherit from their husbands upon their deaths. However, this law is not often enforced, particularly in the rural areas that make up the majority of the nation's land.

Where the law might impede taking land from a widow, oppressive cultural understandings of women can be brought to bear. One of these is to find a way to ensure that the community sees a widow as bad or dishonorable. Widows in Tanzania are regularly accused of responsibility in their husbands' deaths. Sometimes this is coupled with the charge that the widow is a witch who cursed her husband. In other cases, the widow of a man who died from AIDS is whispered to be the one who gave him the fatal disease. In all these situations, widows are in mortal peril, as people in the community may seek to take what they see as justice into their own hands.

Additionally, widows in Tanzania often face the risk of violence from their dead husband's family. Widows who seek to retain use of the family home are regularly physically abused and run off by the in-laws. Sometimes the children are also taken, particularly by families with means. In other cases, the widow is left to take care of the children while losing access to her home and land.

For women in Tanzania and the host of countries where inheritance law is unjust or is not enforced, the story of Jesus seeing and paying attention to a widow in her plight is heard with awe at the power of God to give

life. This story of Jesus' resurrection power gives hope today to widows around the world.

Who Would Jesus See Today? Who Do We See?

Even if we could go back in time to look deeply into the town of Nain, we might not see anything worth noticing, nor anything that would draw us to pay attention. When Jesus visited, Nain was a very small town, with little to recommend it. Modern-day Nain, the place scholars and archaeologists understand to be the present iteration of the ancient town where a woman who lost both her husband and her son once lived, is a small town still. It does not attract many visitors or tourists, and it is not listed on anyone's top ten lists of things to see.

The widow of Nain might not have been noticed by most people either. We might be made sad, or feel pity in a vague way, when viewing the funeral procession of someone we do not know. Or we might be annoyed, anxious, or even angry that those taking part in the procession are slowing down traffic and blocking the road. And depending on what else might be going on for us at that moment, we might not have seen the procession and the widow, nor paid attention, at all.

For one widow, Jesus' simple act of seeing her clearly and responding with assistance—this made all the difference. Reflecting on this story can move us to ask: Who is Jesus calling us to see today? Where are we being asked to pay attention? Who needs the gift of our seeing them, and how can our seeing give the gift of life?

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