



“The Widow’s Witness”

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Hayward, California*

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Mark 12:38-44*

She was a gray-haired lady, who wore everyday cotton dresses, sensible shoes, and silver cat-eye glasses. On cold or rainy days she also wore a homemade sweater over her dress and a chore coat that came from a local feed store, and black rubber milking boots.

I met this woman, whose name was Elsa Balzer, in the spring of 1985, shortly after I was appointed interim pastor of her congregation during my senior year in college.

On Sundays, Elsa Balzer exchanged her chore clothes for polyester dresses and sensible “grandma shoes.” You know the type—the black leather lace-ups with one inch heels—the kind that everybody’s grandma used to wear.

I haven’t seen Elsa Balzer in over twenty-five years, and I stopped receiving the newsletter from her church—Bethlehem UCC—after I graduated from seminary. But unless she is in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the oldest living person, Elsa Balzer has been dead for several years. She was already well into her eighties when I first met her.

Elsa Balzer was a lifetime member of Bethlehem United Church of Christ, a small rural church planted near the village of Kiel, in Northeast Wisconsin. Bethlehem Church, like the town in Palestine for which it was named, is a remote place. About 150 years ago, one of the congregation’s founders carved out an acre of land on his dairy farm for the church building, and the accompanying cemetery and parsonage.

The parishioners were a bit on the folksy side, you might say. They didn’t go a lot of places or interact with many people outside of their home culture. Most of the members were dairy farmers, who worked in the cheese factories between the first and second milkings of the day. A few others had town jobs at factories where they made things that people could use—things like work gloves, bibbed overalls, and small machines.

As far as I could tell, Elsa Balzer was a subsistence dairy farmer. She only had a few acres of land and a few cows, which she fed mostly the feed that she was able to raise. Unlike most of her neighbors, Elsa never automated her barn. She just milked the

number of cows that she could handle by herself, by hand. She never had the capital or the family labor needed to expand.

Behind her house stood a small chicken coop, where she raised a brood of Rhode Island Reds and sold the eggs to neighbors for pin money. Next to the chicken coop were a large vegetable garden and some fruit trees where she raised most of the fruits and vegetables that she ate. Her house was small, and simple, but clean and in good repaired. Only God knows how she managed that dairy farm by herself, much less how she eked out a living sufficient to keep up the property, pay her taxes, cover her healthcare costs, and contribute a tithe to her church—but she did.

The fact that no one in this informal culture ever called Elsa Balzer by her first name was not lost on me. Everyone just referred to her as “Mrs. Balzer.” I believe that this formality was a gesture of respect for a woman who was the matriarch of her church, and a pillar in her community.

Like most people of her generation, Mrs. Balzer didn’t talk much about herself. One got to know her largely by observation, and by paying attention to what others would share if you asked them a few discrete questions about her.

I realized that Mrs. Balzer was a widow during the first week of my ministry. In the middle of the afternoon late in the week, I was working in my study and heard a car drive up. I heard the engine shut off and a car door close, but no one entered the church. So I went out to see who was there.

I followed the sidewalk to the cemetery, where the car was parked, and where I could see Mrs. Balzer back by the tall pines, on her knees, planting red geraniums next to her husband’s headstone.

Eager to get acquainted, I walked over to the grave where she was digging a hole for her flowers, and realized that I was smack in the middle of her family’s plot.

The dates on her husband’s headstone and the names on the stones around us revealed that she had been a widow for a very long time, and that she had suffered many losses. To the right of her husband’s headstone was a government-issued marker for their son, who had been killed in Korea.

I was humbled at the thought of her suffering, and said quietly, “Mrs. Balzer, I’m sorry for your losses.” She nodded while tending her flowers, but never looked up.

A few moments later, I asked, “Do you have other children?”

“No,” she said.

Clearly she thought that I meant biological children, and I guess, in that moment, I did. But over the next six months that I served as interim pastor at Bethlehem church, I

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learned that Mrs. Balzer had many children in her church family. She had been a church teacher for three generations of youth at Bethlehem church. She had also been their Bible School teacher, president of the Women's Guild, the congregation's delegate to the Annual Conference, and an Elder of the church.

Elsa Balzer had taught three generations of children to love God, to memorize the *Heidelberg Catechism* in German, and to embrace the core values of the Judeo-Christian faith. She was *de facto* the person by whom Bethlehem Church set its moral compass.

Preachers came and went in small country churches like that. The bright, articulate ones were usually fresh out of seminary, wet behind the ears, and they didn't stay long. The ones who lingered weren't so bright or articulate. Few if any of them really understood the people. They wanted to. They just didn't have the background. As a result, these erstwhile preachers barely knew the difference between a bull and a cow, they didn't know what the price of cheese was in Chicago, or that Chicago was associated with the Board of Trade, and they were clueless about what a dairy buy-out would mean for their parishioners.

There were long periods of time when Bethlehem UCC went without a church musician. They never had a paid secretary or a sexton. Families took turns cleaning the church, mowing the lawns in summer, and plowing the parking lot during the winter. When someone in the parish died, a few of the men brought in a backhoe and some shovels to open and close the grave.

In the midst of this small country parish stood Elsa Balzer, a pillar of the congregation, but not the kind of *Grande Dame* that one might associate with more affluent or cosmopolitan organizations.

Mrs. Balzer was a lifelong Sunday School and Bible School teacher. She was the first—and for a long time the only—woman to serve on the Board of Elders. Over the course of the six months that I was interim minister, I realized what a powerful moral force she was in the community, and how she gently, quietly—but no less prophetically—provoked others to do what was right.

I remember, for example, that it was brought to the attention of the Elders that the ovens in the church kitchen were on their last legs. A couple of the handymen had repaired them numerous times, and even the expert from Sears said that there was nothing left to be done but to replace them.

So the moderator called on the treasurer and asked what funds were available to use for purchasing replacement stoves. The treasurer said that there was no money in reserve to cover the cost, and that maybe the church would have to go without. There was a long silence, which was finally broken by a discussion of the low price of milk, and speculation about what other expenses that the church might incur in the not too distant future. The conversation continued to devolve from there.

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Meanwhile, Mrs. Balzer quietly reached into her purse, pulled out her checkbook, wrote out a check, and placed it upside down in the middle of table, and said softly, "I believe that we will need to raise the money ourselves. I'd like to get us started with my offering, and I will ask the Women's Guild if they will help us raise the money, by hosting a barbeque and ice cream social, before the summer is out. We won't need the stoves for a barbeque, and the freezers are working just fine for ice cream. The matter was settled.

Mrs. Balzer was the spark plug who got the rest of the church unstuck from their sad, scared spiritual places that kept them from experiencing the joy of the Lord and from getting on with what needed to be done—even if that effort felt insufficient to the challenge before them.

I have no idea what amount Mrs. Balzer wrote on her check. It might have been \$1. It might have been \$1,000. In a lot of ways, it doesn't really matter what amount was on the check. What mattered most was the spirit in which her gift was given, and the way in which her whole life inspired others to give generously out of what they had, and to do what was right even when it wasn't easy.

Before the meeting was over, the rest of the Elders anteed-up with their own contributions. Those who could wrote checks. Those who couldn't write checks contributed other services and ideas. One guy said that he would butcher a hog and provide the meat for the barbeque. Another said that he and his boys would haul away the old stoves and bring in the new ones to save on delivery charges. Someone else suggested that the old appliances could be taken to a salvage yard, rather than a dump and that the salvage money be used toward the purchase of new stoves. The plans were set, and the meeting was adjourned.

II

The gospel of Mark describes a similar circumstance:

Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.

In this and the other Bible stories featured in today's lectionary, and in several stories throughout the gospels, the heroes of these several passages are widows.

It is no small matter that widows were featured prominently in scripture, particularly in stories about Jesus, because widows—like children, orphans, the sick and infirmed, strangers, foreigners, and aliens—were among the most disenfranchised people in

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biblical times. They were unlikely subjects of interest to famous people like Jesus heroes.

In those days, women held their status in church and in religious life largely in relation to their husbands, fathers, and sons. A woman who had no husband, who was not taken in by her brothers-in-law, or who was not cared for by her sons, if she had them, was destitute.

Women had little to no voice in these times and cultures. They rarely owned property or held positions of influence. And yet, in Jesus' circle, many women—particularly widowed women—had a place, a purpose, and a prophetic witness that was often exemplary. And so he was compelled to tell these stories like the widow's *mite*, with the hope that others might learn from these examples and follow them.

With his stories, and by drawing widows around him, Jesus said in essence: Be like Ruth and Naomi, who stuck with each other in spite of their losses. Be like the widow at Zarephath, who fed her last meal to Elijah. Be like the woman who gave her last coins. Trust wholeheartedly. Give generously. And embrace your true identity, not in relationship with some other person, but in relationship with the one who has conquered death itself.

III

Given what I've told you about Elsa Balzer, you are probably not surprised to learn that the barbeque-fundraiser that she proposed was a huge success. The stoves were paid for in full, and there was enough money earned to replace the crumbling kitchen floor linoleum before the last dish was dry at the barbeque.

Given what I've told you about Elsa Balzer, perhaps you would agree that the most compelling sermon that any of us will ever hear will not be delivered from a church pulpit. It will be delivered by people like her and people like you. The most compelling sermon that any of us will ever hear will be proclaimed through the trust that we exhibit, the generosity that we inspire, and the face of God that we reveal to others.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel: whether we are widows, orphans, strangers, foreigners, aliens, sick or infirmed—whether we are among the least, the last, or the lost in ancient times or today—we are *somebody* in the eyes of God. We are God's beloved children. We are God's unique witness to the good news of the gospel. Nobody else can tell the story quite like us. So let's go and do it. Let's go and be the good news for others. Amen.