

# Heart for the Vulnerable

## (Or: It's All About the Widows and Orphans)

August 10, 2025

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Luke 12:32-40

There is a lot going on in the twelfth chapter of Luke. Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell the story of the Rich Fool, who saved up lots of goods and didn't enjoy them. The lectionary editors, in their wisdom, skipped over verses 22 through 31, containing Jesus' advice not to "worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear." He observed that birds don't worry and they eat; flowers don't worry and they blossom into beauty. Worry, it turns out, doesn't accomplish anything.

That brings us to this section. And here it turns out that the only thing we have to worry about is... what Jesus said next. "Sell your possessions and give alms."

Jesus tended to ask a lot.

Isaiah, about 770 years before, had expressed God's dissatisfaction with a people who had industriously participated in religious ritual but had failed to treat their neighbors well. "Cease to do evil," said Isaiah. "Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow... If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land."

To quote something Lorraine Davis said in a Bible study some time ago, something that's implanted in my brain, "It's all about the widows and the orphans."

Is it? I did a quick search to see how often the Hebrew Scriptures demand the protection of widows. Exodus and Deuteronomy say it a total of eleven times. The prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi named it a total of nine times. In the Psalms you'll find it another three times. That adds up to twenty-two calls for the protection of widows. I got similar results with a search for "orphan" (I won't bore you with the numbers). Oh, and there's one other category that usually gets added to "widows and orphans" as worthy of particular care and protection.

Foreigners. "Aliens" in the usual translation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. The first assertion of the Hebrew Law regarding foreigners in Exodus reads, "There shall be one

law for the native-born and for the alien who resides among you.” Further, “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” The books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy make clear that foreigners are to be honored and protected no less than 21 times.

If you’re depriving the widows and the orphans, who are the poorest of the poor, of justice and sustenance; if you’re abusing the foreigners, who are the most vulnerable of those living in the nation, then you are failing to do the will of God. As Isaiah put it, “Cease to do evil; learn to do good.”

Why, I wonder, do people with so much wealth and power find it so easy to deprive the poor of what little support they receive? Why, I wonder, do people with so much wealth and power find it so easy to shortcut legal due process for those from other lands? Why, I wonder, do people who claim to follow the ways of Jesus cheer when the supports of the vulnerable are pulled away, when the hopes of the foreigner are dashed?

Fifteen years ago the comedian Stephen Colbert said on the Colbert Report: “If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that He commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition ... and then admit that we just don't want to do it.”

I’m surprised CBS/Paramount Global ever hired him, not that they’ve cancelled his show.

It is all about the widows and the orphans and the foreigners. If you want to know about a society, take a look at how it treats those on the margins, those without powerful protectors, those most quickly disposable.

Sell your possessions and give alms, said Jesus.

As Erick J. Thompson writes at Working Preacher, “Are we, as individuals and as a church, ready to help others in need? Have we considered the issues of peace and justice that our society is wrestling with so that we can be a part of God’s solution?”

Dr. Thompson asked that question nine years ago when government acknowledged a role to create a social safety net. For quite some time, religious and non-religious non-profit agencies have labored to fill the gaps in that net. Those can be substantial, but imagine what would happen if local, state, and federal assistance to the vulnerable were ended or severely cut back. We would need to take the lead in God’s solution, to care for the widows and the orphans and the foreigners and the impoverished.

All indications are that we will need to take the lead.

It’s not going to be easy. About half of the US population – and it’s about the same here on Hawai’i Island – belong to communities of faith. We typically pay more in taxes than we give to

charities, religious and non-religious combined. I suppose it's not a secret that not everyone listed on a church's rolls contributes, generally for very good reasons. That's not a complaint, but it is a reality. We don't have the resources government has. Do we have the ability to match what they've been doing? I don't know.

But it's all about the widows and the orphans. It's about justice for the foreigners. It's about solidarity with the poor.

It's going to be even harder, though. On July 25th the President issued an executive order that essentially calls for the criminalization of homelessness, mental illness, and addiction. UCC General Minister and President the Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson responded this week by writing, "While there are members of the homeless population who have substance abuse and/or mental health challenges, these are not the experiences of the entire homeless and unhoused population. Nor is this population solely responsible for 'crime and disorder.' It is disingenuous to opine that incarcerating and institutionalizing the homeless population will end crime and disorder."

According to United for ALICE – ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed – 10% of Hawai'i residents lived below the poverty level in 2023. Are you shocked by that? I'm appalled. One in ten of our neighbors can't meet their basic needs. And: an additional 35% of Hawai'i residents have "income above the FPL [Federal Poverty Line], but not enough to afford basic expenses in the county where they live."

"Households below the [ALICE] Threshold are forced to make impossible choices — like deciding whether to pay for utilities or a car repair, whether to buy food or fill a prescription."

Because housing is the biggest expense for most people, everyone in an ALICE household – a third of our neighbors – is one crisis away from homelessness. One crisis: something like a medical emergency, a work-interrupting injury, a house fire, or a natural disaster.

It's all about the widows and the orphans. And the foreigners. And the folks for whom the ends just don't meet.

In the meantime, wealthy Americans get trillions in new tax breaks – but the new law imposed a curious cap on the deductibility of charitable donations for the wealthiest. Really. That took me by surprise, too. Make lots of money, pay less taxes. Just don't help people with it.

Not even the widows and the orphans. Definitely not the foreigners. Don't aid the poor.

That's a long way from Isaiah. It's further from Jesus.

The irony to all this is that Jesus' story about the servants who stayed awake to welcome their master home experienced a grand reversal. Did you notice? They could have expected to set

out a light supper for him, but instead, he had them sit at the table and the master served them.

The master served the servants. The master expected attentive servants, alert servants, prepared servants, active servants. The master asked a lot. Then the master served them.

There are masters in this land who are determined not just to fail the widows, orphans, foreigners, and poor. They are determined to abuse and oppress them, and I don't think I'm overstating the case. These are the masters whom Isaiah condemned. These are the masters that crucified Jesus.

Let us be the diligent, attentive, and active servants. Let us be the ones who meet the expectations of Isaiah and strive to meet the expectations of Jesus. Let us be the ones to welcome the widows, the orphans, the foreigners, and the poor. Let us be the ones to shed the burden of our possessions and take on the freedom of generosity.

Let us be ready to be seated at Jesus' table.

Amen.

*by Eric Anderson*