

“Daring to Live The Widow’s Dream” by David W. Lloyd

**11/12/2006 by David W. Lloyd:
Daring to Live The Widow’s Dream**

A Sermon by David W. Lloyd
Seekers Church
November 12, 2006

Daring to Live The Widow’s Dream

On Thursday I visited my mother and at her request, drove her to my hometown of Georgetown, Delaware and watched the Returns Day celebration. Georgetown is the county seat, established in the late 1700’s in the center of the county in large part because people on the western side of the county complained that it was too onerous to travel the thirty-some miles to conduct legal business and to vote in Lewes, the county seat on Delaware Bay. (There was no Rehoboth Beach then.) After the ballots were cast in Georgetown, it took two days for the ballots to be taken to and counted in Dover, the state capital, 40 miles away and the results to be brought back to Georgetown. Historians note that the farmers who had wanted the new county seat did not seem to complain about the two-day wait until the election results were announced, perhaps due to

their heavy drinking and gambling during those two days. On the second day after Election Day, the competing candidates rode in the same carriages in a parade, and then listened as the town crier called out the election results from the courthouse balcony. Losing candidates were not only expected to congratulate the winners but to suffer through the winners' speeches. Supporters of the losing candidates retired to the taverns until the ox that had been roasted was ready to eat. The next day everyone returned to his normal work, albeit with huge hangovers. Over the years the tradition of Returns Day has continued every two years even though everyone now knows who won the election several hours after the polls close. I remember marching in the Returns Day parade as a member of the band during my middle school and high school years. In recent years, lots of folks dress in period costume, the candidates have reverted to riding in well-maintained horse-drawn carriages, and a horse-drawn glass-sided hearse carries a hatchet, which is symbolically buried, which is a tradition we probably should urge both political parties to adopt in every state and in the Congress. I know that for those of us in Seekers who are Democrats, Tuesday's results are cause for celebration, but it might be good for the country to bury the hatchet rather than wielding it against those Republicans in office whose numbers are currently diminished and it might be good for us as a congregation to bury it in Seekers, too.

I enjoyed watching the Returns Day parade with my mother. This is the first one she has ever seen without my father, and having read this week's Gospel, the Hebrew scriptures' passage about Ruth and Naomi – both widows – and the alternate Hebrew Scriptures' passage about Elijah and the widow, I was quite aware that she is a widow. I observed a moment of silence yesterday at 11 a.m. in honor of the Armistice that ended World War I, and thought about how many widows were left behind after those four years of monstrous violence. Moreover,

as I looked at the photographs in Friday's Washington Post of the soldiers and Marines who had died in Iraq during October – nearly three pages worth – I thought of how our country depends on the willingness of young men and women, and some in the Reserves and the National Guard who are not so young, to risk their lives on behalf of our national policy. Some of my work colleagues have regular contact with the organization "Gold Star Wives," which is composed of widows – most of them very young – of the fallen.

Today we focus on widows.

In Jesus' time, Jewish widows had no right of inheritance, which made them unique in the Mediterranean world. If a widow had no children, she could return to her father's home, at least if her father was a priest, and she could remarry her late husband's brother. If she had a son, the son was expected to support her. Not only did a Jewish widow have no economic standing, she had no social standing, either. If a man died before old age, it was widely believed that this was God's judgment for some grave sin he must have committed, and that disgrace carried over to his widow. It was also easy to tell which women were widows; widows who followed Mosaic Law strictly wore clothing that identified them as widows. This combination of economic and social inferiority for widows created a climate in which they were easily exploited, and some of the prophets' most strident condemnations of injustice used the mistreatment of widows as an example. We just heard Jesus' denunciation of the religious hypocrites who have everyone's respect while they deprive widows. Moreover, even if they were not oppressed, they were not valued. The prominent teachers of the Torah were seen as an asset to the synagogue, but poor widows were seen as burdens.

Seekers Church has assets. The first asset we have is what economists call disposable income. Last week the Stewards approved a draft budget for 2007 of \$245,000, the same as for this current year. Of that \$245,000, \$46,000 -nearly 19% – is specifically for giving to domestic organizations and \$25,000 – a little over 10% – is specifically for international organizations – the combined amount for external ministry is not quite 30% of our budget. We plan on spending \$43,900 – almost another 18% – on this building, and since we make it available to the community, we could claim that nearly half of our budget is for ministry. We are a small church. Yet we think that we can meet that budget because we are on target to meet that same amount this current year.

The second asset we have as members of Seekers Church is societal competence. We are an educated congregation. I believe that all of us have a high school diploma, most of us have college degrees, and a fair number of us have graduate degrees, and when we speak, you cannot tell who has more education. We speak English well and are articulate. We know how to write letters to our elected political leaders (thank you, Emily and Pat and Trish) and how to testify at public hearings (thank you, Jeffrey). We know how to sign a lease, buy a car, open a bank account, maintain good credit, find childcare, shop for good deals and evaluate quality.

We know, but we still need to remember, that not all of God's children have the amount of societal competence we do. Some of the domestic organizations to which we give money from our Seekers budget minister directly to people who are not educated, are politically unconnected, and have little of the societal capital that we have. In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, Rev. Maria Teresa Palmer, founder of *Iglesia Unida de Cristo*, a United Church of Christ mission in

Chapel Hill, said that when she first came to America as an exchange student, she heard an offertory prayer from a layman that sounded to her like, "Thank you that we are citizens of this great country. Thank you that we have good jobs that pay ten times what the rest of the world makes so that we can bring this bountiful offering." She adds that she wants to add, "Forgive us for taking our good jobs for granted and doing so little to secure living wages for all of your children. Forgive us for enjoying our luxurious church building while so many of your children feel unwelcome and unworthy to even come in" Reverend Palmer adds,

The immigrants are poor in voice and status. May God forgive me when I feel that I am of more value to the kingdom. May God forgive us, his churchpeople, for using our social capital to attract to our churches those who re powerful and rich while we ignore those who might seem a burden – those whose humble worship surely pleases God.

In our Gospel message, Jesus observed people making donations into the temple treasury, among them people donating large sums and a widow giving two small coins that added together had little value. We would immediately assume that like the wealthy donors she gave what she could spare, which in her case wasn't much, and while the wealthy donors added to their social capital by the fact that their large donations were seen publicly, her donating wouldn't add to her meager social capital, if she had any at all.

Jesus saw that that the widow gave what she could not spare to give. She had nothing and so she risked her life on behalf of her faith. She did not cling to life, but was trusting that life would be given to her. For me, that level of trust is reflected in the words of the old commitment statement from the Church of the Saviour, "I joyfully and with abandon commit

my life and destiny to Christ.” Here is the Good News – when we are willing to give our lives to God we lose our false lives that depend upon societal capital but we gain our true eternal lives – spiritual capital.

In the first of our theology classes that Pat and Kate are offering, we examined the question, “Does Jesus matter?” We each answered this for ourselves, with some of us saying that Jesus is the example for our lives and others of us saying that through Jesus we come to know God and God’s self-giving love. In our second class, we examined the question, “Does God need me?” Some in the class believed deeply that God needs us to do the physical work of bringing about God’s shalom into being. We are God’s incarnation.

We left the familiar confines of 2025 Massachusetts Avenue two years ago. In the process most of us who had ties to the Church of the Saviour missions in the Adams Morgan neighborhood, missions conceived to bring God’s shalom into being, have seen our ties to those missions loosen a bit. In our new location, we are still getting to know some of the ministries of Takoma, Takoma Park and Silver Spring, including the Silver Spring Interfaith Housing Coalition and the work of the Covenant Community. Nonetheless, I am confident that we will find missions that tie us here. There are many opportunities for us here to find people who have little or no wealth or social capital – the 21st century form of the widows of Jesus’ day – and to find ways to minister to them and with them, to participate in bringing about God’s shalom for them.

What might some of those opportunities to bring about God’s shalom be? Let us dare to dream anew. Would there be a mission

group devoted to helping immigrants from Guatemala who live in the Takoma Park, Langley Park and Silver Spring areas? Would there be a mission group that raises funds for micro-credit lending in the Third World? Would there be more teams to help with the Silver Spring Interfaith Housing Coalition? Would there be political education groups that conduct community meetings to discuss national legislation relating to Social Security, Medicaid, immigration, minimum wages, etc.?

Dreaming the future of what God's shalom would look like is just the first challenge. We must then dare to risk our spiritual capital to help bring that dreamed future into reality. This will mean investing both our financial capital and social capital, to go from donating our personal funds that we can spare from the demands of our middle class standard of living to donating our personal funds without which we cannot live. To go from living the lives we thought we would live and should live, to living the lives God wants us to live, and needs us to live. That is a far scarier prospect. It means that even at my age, I have to learn to trust God for my life rather than using the financial and social capital that I have accumulated over nearly 60 years.

In my work in the Defense Department, I am deeply moved when I visit a military installation and see the young men and women who serve in our nation's armed forces. They are so young, so bright, so well trained and physically fit. Each of them took an oath before God to serve faithfully our nation and to defend the Constitution with their own lives. Of course, none of them really believes that they might be called to lay down their own life to fulfill that oath. No 18-year-old ever believes that he or she will die. Nevertheless, they understand the seriousness of the oath they take and they do their best to live up to it. Far too often, we take them for

granted, remembering them only when they did lay down their lives.

Last month on Recommitment Sunday, we had the opportunity to make a membership commitment and a Stewards commitment. The [Seekers Church member's commitment](#) does not require you to say that you “joyfully and with abandon commit your life and destiny to Christ.” Nevertheless, do you consider your membership commitment to be an oath you made before God? Can you dare to dream it to be a promise to help bring God's shalom into being, at the cost of your own life if necessary, like the soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen who took their oath? Can we who have so much to lose dare to dream that we will trust God as much as the widow who had only her life to lose will? I wonder – the closing lyrics of our prelude speak to me:

*I am the kid who has this habit of dreaming
And sometimes it gets me in trouble, too.
But the truth is, I can no more stop dreaming
Than I can make them all come true.*

(The Kid by Buddy Mondlock)