

Sermon *Care for the Widow and the Orphan*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, delivered at Temple Beth Israel 10.24.25

Thank you, Rabbi Jessica, for inviting me to deliver a sermon for this evening's Shavuot service. And thank you for preaching at All Angels this coming Sunday!

My mom was adopted. I don't know when I first knew it; not that it mattered, I was close with my grandmother (my grandfather died when I was young, so I don't remember much about him) so thinking about my genetic background didn't really matter to me. Then, my dad's sister started researching the Marshall line. She did so much work – which I found fascinating – that I started wondering about my mom's side. With the invention of Ancestry-dot-com (and an online sale for only \$70 dollars), I decided to take the plunge and find out about my mom's ancestry.

A friend asked me what I hoped would be on my mom's side. I said, "I hope she's Jewish."

I've always felt a connection with the people and tradition of the Jewish faith. My personality type likes the law. I thought I was going to be an attorney; but, as you can see, God had other plans.

One of the pieces of Scripture that stuck out for me is the command from God: *care for widows and orphans*. I knew that my grandparents opened their hearts and adopted my mom. It was the law becoming flesh, if you will, for me.

The report came back. I am 76% English. Add 10% Scottish and 3% Irish, and, well, my hopes of being Jewish did not come to fruition. Nevertheless, the command to care for those in need still holds true for me.

When I was five years old, my parents became foster parents of a student they both knew (mom was a Middle School math teacher and dad a HS biology teacher). The school counsellor met with mom and dad and said that the student they both knew – Ken – was in trouble. His family of origin could no longer take care of him; something happened then (not sure what it was); and either he went into Juvenile Hall or a foster family. Ken is of African descent. It was 1974. He was bright, outgoing, a track star and later became student body president. But, his future would not be as bright if a young black man went into Juve-hall. Dad asked, "How many days do we have to decide?" The counsellor replied: you have until tonight. Suddenly I had a much older brother in the house.

Care for the widow and the orphan.

Scripture came to life for me when Ken moved into our house. My mom was adopted and here we had opened our house for someone who needed their case pleaded for them (Isaiah 1:17). Ken graduated from HS, went into the Army, with the GI bill went to college then law school then became a public defender to help kids who have a family background like his own.

Christi, my wife, and I made friends with a couple in Seattle who were supporting an orphanage. We both have a camp counsellor background; also, our efforts at becoming pregnant were becoming frustrated; so we traveled with our friends to Russia to help the orphanage. It was a stage three home which houses 10 through 16-year-olds (when someone turns 17, they're kicked out). They were in the most need so that's where we went. We probably had the romantic idea that we'd swing by a class-one home to see about adopting a child under the age of two... but we never made it there. We fell in love with all 52 kids in the orphanage. God made it clear that our daughters, Galina and Victoria, were to come home with us. We started the long process and built a legal bridge between the US and Russia to make it happen.

While we were in Russia, just days before the court date for adoption, we received a curve ball in the form of a document that no one in Russia had ever seen requested before. It was for the Washington State Patrol to issue a letter saying that we have no legal record. We had already completed that portion, but someone wanted a letter from the WA State Patrol. Everything about the adoption was put on hold until we could do it. (We learned later that there were elements in the government that didn't want this, or any international adoption, to go through so they'll ask for something out of the blue) I called Dad. It was really early in the morning in Seattle. I told him point blank what we needed and, if he wanted to be a grandfather, we needed the document. He said he'd have it to us and asked for the fax number to send it to. Dad called the foster care people that he knew in the state capital. He reminded them about Ken and then told them what we needed. Three hours later, we had the fax from the Washington State Patrol saying exactly what we needed.

Care for the widows and the orphans. It's an individual call that requires community.

Fifty-five days after September 11th, 2001, Christi and I became parents of a fifteen-year-old and a ten-year-old. Three months later, we were pregnant with our first-born son, Ethan. Seven years later, we were pregnant with our son Elijah. Nowadays, we have a 39-year-old with four children, a 34-year-old with one child, a 22-year-old who just got married, and a 15-year-old.

It was during our first trip to Russia when I finally opened my heart to God's call to ministry. The call was there when I was confirmed at the age of 12. I ran from it. Nevertheless, it was in a cold Russian hotel room where I stopped running and asked God to show me what he had in store for me. And now, I've been ordained for 18 years and have a Rabbi as a friend and am neighbors to Temple Beth Israel.

If it hadn't been for my grandparents to hear the call of caring for the orphan, I wouldn't be here. That one act has created a cascading effect of care.

The lesson at All Angels on Sunday is from Genesis with God telling Noah that he is making a covenant with him to never flood the earth again. *The rainbow will be a sign of the covenant.* What I hear in this story is as follows: God said that he's not going to ever flood the entire earth again; but, with that promise, there will be orphans and widows. God will take care of the flood situation; we need to care for widows and orphans.

Ministry has allowed me to care for widows and widowers. I have been there on their worst day – when the love of their life died. And for all the worst days to follow. Caring for widows is different than caring for orphans. But both are vulnerable and lost at times. Both seek for identity with themselves and what their place is in society. We are not to forget them but to advocate for them, to plead for them, to seek justice, and to care for them. The rainbow is the symbol for us to remember that God takes care of the flood thing, we take care of the orphan and widow.

The widow and orphan often feel like outsiders. Scripture reminds us, often, to remember that we too once were foreigners and strangers. And we are to care and watch over the stranger and foreigner in our land. God will make it so the earth will never be flooded again; but the trade off – there will be strangers and foreigners in the land.

We are to take care of them too.

One of the best things All Angels does is in February we sell donated art and contribute every dollar to Turning Points in Bradenton. People from Temple Beth Israel and All Angels donated art they no longer need, and in groups from both houses of prayer, we sell it. A group from TBI and All Angels went to tour Turning Points together. We saw how they are caring for the widows in our community that have nowhere to turn to for dental care, food supplements, and, at times, housing. They care for the orphan – the child or young adult who have no family to support them. They feed people daily with the Our Daily Bread program where no one is turned away. They are caring for the foreigner and stranger in our land. And we – the people of Temple Beth Israel and All Angels – have become friends. We have gotten to know each other and recognize our shared responsibility to care for the orphan and the widow in our community.

God is holding back the flood that will cover the entire earth. As an exchange, however, there will be orphans, widows, strangers and foreigners. The rainbow reminds us of that exchange and also serves as a reminder that God has called us to care for the most vulnerable and needy in our community.

May it be God's will that we continue to work together as neighbors and friends as we follow God's call to care for those in need. Amen.