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A UNIFIED VISION: HERMENEUTICS OF
HUNGER AND FEMINIST ETHICS OF CARE
AS MEANS FOR APPROACHING
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, WITH AN
EXAMINATION OF U.S. POLITICAL
INVOLVEMENT IN LIBERIA

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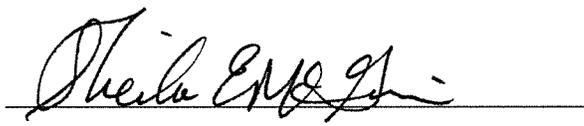
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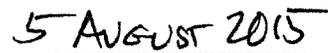
An Essay Submitted to
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By
Joy Parker
2015

The essay of Joy Parker is hereby accepted:

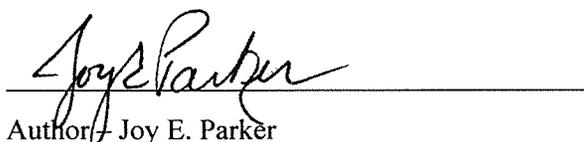
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Advisor – Dr. Sheila E. McGinn

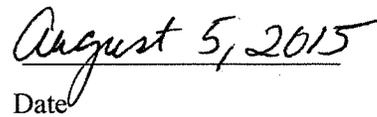
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Author – Joy E. Parker

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Introduction

*Who knows? This Africa so richly blest
With golden lands and froned palms in air,
The envy of great nations far and near,
May yet the world lead back to peace and rest,
Goodwill to all. Who knows? Who knows?*

*And when the fullness of God's time has come
And men of divers colors, tribes and castes
Have owned Him King; when hate and sin are passed,
The Prince of Peace may found His home
In Africa at last. Who knows? Who knows?¹*

Many a theologian and biblical scholar have lamented the breakdown in communication between preachers and professors, apostles and academics. William Countryman, for one, describes the “fragmentation” that so often exists between academics and nonacademics when it comes to interpreting scripture.² Countryman wisely observes, however, that this breakdown in communication affects numerous facets of contemporary life.

¹ A. L. Milner-Brown, “Who Knows?,” in *Poems from Black Africa*, edited by Langston Hughes (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1963), 78.

² William Countryman, *Interpreting the Truth: Changing the Paradigm of Biblical Studies* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 1. This sentiment has been echoed by many other scholars, each articulating a distinct variation on the same point. See, for example, Mary Ann Tolbert, “A New Teaching with Authority: A Re-Evaluation of the Authority of the Bible” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 168-189. In this article, Tolbert criticizes the tendency to evaluate scripture divorced from the interpretive rigors that would be expected in any other discipline. In raising her objection, she tacitly criticizes those in the religious establishment who fail to undergird their interpretation with intellectual integrity as well as those who shirk from communicating with their larger audience – whether congregation, readership, etc. – about the truths they have discovered in their own research. See also, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *Excavating Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). Crossan and Reed endeavor to offer a synthesized examination of biblical interpretation and archaeology with – I would argue – something of a bias toward requiring that the former submit to the demonstrable realities of the latter. In so doing, they accomplish the sort of rigorous inquiry that meets Tolbert’s aforementioned criteria for usefulness and satisfies Countryman’s call for interdisciplinary dialogue. The list of scholars doing this type of work across any number of disciplines is long and distinguished.

Scholars in the natural sciences experiment with ways of bringing different disciplines to bear on common questions. Scholars in the humanities wonder how to overcome the increasing fragmentation of method. There is a perennial plea for better, clearer communication with the larger world. Only with difficulty, over the last half century, have natural scientists begun to recognize that they have some responsibility to reflect on ethics and the public use of their discoveries. Schools of law, medicine, and business have begun to recognize that it is not enough to prepare specialists who have no concern for the larger contexts in which they work, whether social, psychological, or ethical. Academics at large have begun looking to revive the tradition of the “public intellectual,” the person who brings contemporary scholarship into conversation with the needs and realities of public discourse.³

It would seem that — according to Countryman and others — interdisciplinary communication is lacking. Communication between the self-proclaimed “religious” sector and those in other disciplines is especially problematic. For the purposes of this particular inquiry, then, we must acknowledge the tension that exists between theology and secular political philosophy in the public sphere.⁴ The words “separation of church and state” pop up at untimely — and perhaps inappropriate — moments, and many Americans think religion should be a private matter and kept to oneself. There are reasons for this tension. Religious dogma has frequently inserted itself into public debate in inappropriate ways, delaying justice for many and clouding issues from women’s health to public school textbooks.⁵ Similarly, a focus on religious conversion historically

³ Countryman, *Interpreting the Truth*, 2-3.

⁴ Pew Research Center, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (June 1, 2008), <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/06/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>. This research indicates that only 14% of adults cite religion as the primary influence on their political views. This statistic is surprising when juxtaposed against a substantial majority who claim faith in God and adherence to an established religious tradition. The combination of these two figures suggests that while a majority of individuals value their personal religious participation, they do not see it as relevant to their political (public) decision-making.

⁵ Any number of current events demonstrate this point. For information on the examples mentioned, see Tara Boyle, Vickey Farden, and Maria Godoy, “Teaching Evolution: A State-by-State Debate” (December 20, 2005), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4630737>; see also

has resulted in an absence of attention to people's material needs, at best, and total disregard for human rights, at worst. To complicate matters further, the plurality of views held under the auspices of Christianity alone is overwhelming and defy all but the most limited attempts at identifying commonalities. It is hardly surprising, then, to see a number of secular philosophies arise that endeavor to examine moral, ethical, and public policy issues divorced from a specifically Judeo-Christian worldview.

For progressive people of faith, this creates an interesting quandary. While individuals often wish to remain connected to the faith tradition that has, perhaps, informed their upbringing and general worldview, that affiliation comes at a cost since "religion" is so often summarily associated with positions and behaviors that many find objectionable. The progressive person of faith may well determine that secular philosophy provides the more appealing worldview, at times. On the other side of the equation, secular philosophy frequently seems relegated to the margins, unable to gain the sizeable audience and airtime enjoyed by propaganda within many Christian denominations. These valuable perspectives often remain rather theoretical and are confined to the academic circles in which they originated.

It would seem, then, that a more open dialogue between practicing faith communities and secular philosophical communities would be mutually beneficial. Communities of faith would benefit from the scholarship and anthropological study being done in the academy. Those persons of faith with a more progressive disposition would

Neal Conan, Michael Gerson, and Simone Campbell, "Politics and Faith Collide in Contraceptives Debate" (February 14, 2012), <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/14/146875969/catholics-split-on-contraceptives-and-health-care>.

likely find themselves more at home.⁶ At the same time, the philosophical theories that are being discussed around classroom tables and in lecture halls might find themselves out in the mainstream with some hope of being implemented on a larger scale and in more places. Said more succinctly, both the Catholic Church and any number of Protestant denominations have the resources and the clout to test out some of these theories in a more substantial way. These organizations are already positioned to engage sizeable populations with aid, education, and ideology.

There is an important assertion that makes this type of thinking possible, and that assertion is the central thesis of this paper. The collaborative thinking proposed here is possible and desirable in large part because — as I will demonstrate — these two schools of thought already have a great deal in common. It will be the task of this essay to demonstrate that progressive biblical hermeneutics — specifically a hermeneutic of hunger — and the secular political philosophy known as a feminist ethics of care are excellent ideological partners. Based on similar foundational principles and seeking to accomplish similar goals, a healthy and mutually edifying relationship between adherents of these two worldviews holds the potential to transform communities of faith and those in the public sector alike.

⁶ I refer here to the now-famous research conducted by the Pew Organization, which documents attrition in traditional faith communities. For more, see Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “American’s Weakening Ties to Organized Religion, 1973-2012: Generations & Politics,” delivered August 8, 2013 (PowerPoint presentation), posted August 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/audio-and-slides-religion-trends-in-the-u-s/>. See also Frank Newport, “The Significance of the Rise of the Nones: Fundamental Change in Religiosity or Change in Labeling?,” delivered August 8, 2013 (PowerPoint presentation), posted August 2013, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/08/19/audio-and-slides-religion-trends-in-the-u-s/>; and Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” in *PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project* (October 9, 2012), <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

In demonstration of this thesis, a tri-partite structure will be adopted. The first section is an exegetical study of Mark 12:38-44 through the lens of a hermeneutic of hunger. This passage traditionally has been read as a pericope about sacrificial giving, but contemporary interpretation suggests two important correctives. First, there may be a multiplicity of valuable — if, perhaps, not equal — readings; and second, attention must be paid to individuals — namely the widow — who remain voiceless in the story. In its opening pages, this paper will reexamine the passage and suggest a more nuanced interpretation of the pericope.

In the second section, a feminist ethic of care will be defined and discussed. It will be asserted that this traditionally secular political philosophy shares much in common with the ongoing theological movement toward sensitively considering how we are to be in community with one another. A discussion within this ethical framework requires some recognition that violence is often the posture communities adopt when they have failed to value care work and the voices of the marginalized. Thus, some conversation about violence and war is in order, a theme that will re-emerge in the third section. At the conclusion of section two, the threads of biblical hermeneutics and the ethics of care will be woven together, demonstrating that these need not be seen as oppositional philosophies (namely sacred and secular) but as helpful and mutually edifying groups of guiding principles that — when used together — hold the potential to provide a transformative way forward.

The third and final section is a case study of sorts. In it, the long-standing relationship between the United States and Liberia will be explored as an example — both historically and in the present — of a place where such thinking would have been —

and could continue to be — transformative. I have chosen this particular example for two reasons: first, it is a nation with which I am personally familiar and to which I have a personal connection; second, U.S. intervention (and deliberate non-intervention) has occurred over such a span that some assessment can be made of its relative success or failure. It is a clear example of the consequences — some positive but mostly negative — of failing to ask adequate questions about the nature of human relationships and the critical importance of care work that supports infrastructure in civil society. Congruence will be established between what might be called an absence of care ethics — or, just as fairly, an absence of biblical ethics — in Liberia and resultant exploitation and violence, and this positive correlation will be explored. This history of exploitative and negligent policies in Liberia and the violence that ensued as a result will undergird the argument that a new frame is needed through which communities may approach their dealings with one another in a healthy manner.

A short afterword will take the important step of suggesting practices that are in line with a progressive understanding of the message of Jesus, meet the criteria suggested by a feminist ethics of care, and are already functioning effectively to bring individuals from different contexts together. Some of these ideas are already in use within faith communities, and there is tremendous potential for their use on a larger scale.

A Look at Mark 12:38-44

As [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

*He 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."*⁷

This brief and familiar passage has enjoyed such designations as "simple" and "straight-forward"; even so, a significant range of interpretations has emerged over the years. As Addison Wright quips, "...for a story that calls for little explanation, the range of exegetical opinion is amazing."⁸ In a 1991 article, Elizabeth Struthers Malbon thoroughly completed the helpful task of summarizing dominant views around the passage as they progressed from the late 19th century through the following 100 years. H. B. Swete, in his 1898 historical-critical commentary, took a fairly traditional view of a lesson that, he argued, is about sacrificial giving.⁹ Form critic Vincent Taylor published a 1952 commentary that acknowledged, in particular, the arguments against regarding this material as an "original" Jesus story. He freely admitted the presence of the narrative in other traditions and also suggested that — if one is to interpret the story as an event of historical record — there is difficulty in explaining Jesus' rather "magical" knowledge of the widow's status in life.¹⁰ Despite these questions of authenticity, Taylor landed on the

⁷ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁸ Addison G. Wright, "The widow's mites: praise or lament - a matter of context," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (April 1982), 257.

⁹ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, "The poor widow in Mark and her poor rich readers," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (October 1, 1991), 589.

¹⁰ Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1952), 496.

same traditional interpretation as Swete, suggesting that the story is one about sacrificial giving.¹¹

In his 1963 commentary, redaction critic Dennis Nineham expressed skepticism about some elements of the story. He was critical of attempts to use specific details of the pericope — related to the coins and the treasury — to decisively identify the place of origin of Mark's gospel or other specific historical details.¹² Nineham also put more significance on the placement of the pericope between Jesus' condemnation of the scribes (vv. 38-40) and the language about the destruction of the temple (13:1-2). Because he considered the pericope verses 38-44 to have a close relationship with the stories that bookended it, Nineham viewed the widow's contribution as foreshadowing Jesus' own death and total self-sacrifice. This resulted in an interpretive shift away from a focus on the specific generous act of giving one's money toward a focus on the general act of self-sacrifice such as might be appropriate in any number of areas of one's life.¹³ In the end, then, his redaction-critical eye did very little to alter his interpretation of the passage.

In 1982, Addison Wright published a watershed article that prompted significant response from the scholarly community. Virtually every contemporary article on this passage references the essay, in which Wright suggested that Jesus' attitude toward the woman is best understood as one of lament, not praise.¹⁴ He further suggested that, based on comments by Jesus in other passages, rather than approving of the woman's generosity, Jesus would have been devastated by a religious system that required such

¹¹ Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 497-98.

¹² Dennis E. Nineham, *The Gospel of St. Mark* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), 335.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 334-35.

¹⁴ Wright, "The widow's mites," 262.

sacrifice.¹⁵ Like Nineham, Wright made this contention based on the relationship between the passage in question and those that precede and follow it, as noted above. He pointed to Jesus' words about the destruction of the temple, in particular, as further evidence of the sad futility of the woman's gift, calling it "a waste" in the end.¹⁶ R. S. Sugirtharajah — writing somewhat later — agreed, suggesting that "Jesus neither appreciated nor commended her action, he was rather grieved at the way the temple and its functionaries manipulated her to part with what little she had."¹⁷

Contemporary scholar Mary Ann Beavis situates this story among the *chreiai*, or "pronouncement stories," of which there are several in the Markan narrative.¹⁸ She identifies this as a form that would have been recognized as "useful for living" by early hearers.¹⁹ Oddly, however, she comes to rest on the same traditional interpretation of the passage, reiterating the aforementioned theme of self-sacrifice.²⁰ She does make the unique decision to situate this story as a counter to that of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22 who cannot part with his possessions at all.²¹ Beavis — focused specifically on the treatment of women in Mark's gospel — seems eager to set this faithful woman as a foil to the unwilling *man* in Mark 10. In the effort to make that point, however, she seems to close the door on alternate interpretations.

¹⁵ Wright, "The widow's mites," 262.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, "The Widow's Mites Revalued," *Expository Times* 103, no. 2 (November 1, 1991), 43.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Beavis, "Women as models of faith in Mark," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1988), 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Into this conversation, Malbon interjects a caution against seeking out some superior, or “correct,” understanding of the text.²² Her perspective reminds readers that inherent in some readings may be a *preference* for confusion or a desire to present a situation for which there is no easy answer or simple explanation. Whether Jesus told this story (likely not) or later writers chose to include it (most probably), it — like many parables — may have been intentionally thought-provoking. Malbon goes on to suggest *six* relevant narrative contexts, posits that there may be others still, and encourages a flexible spirit in interpreting and understanding the pericope. Her thoughts will be revisited in a moment, as they provide a liberating lens through which to view the passage.

In summary, then, a traditional reading of Mark 12:38-44 continues to inspire countless church stewardship campaigns²³ and is viewed as urging everyone to be a sacrificial giver as was this poor widow who — even in her relative poverty — still gave away the very last (and best) that she had. Such a reading has been interpreted as suggesting that one should give “until it hurts” and further suggests, perhaps, that one should continue to give well past the point of reason. The institutional appeal of such a reading is undeniable, as it stands to benefit structures of power and place the burden of supporting that structure on vulnerable individuals.

A hermeneutic of hunger asks that we be skeptical of such a stance. It asserts that Jesus was partial to the very poor and marginalized and would more likely have decried a

²² Malbon, “The poor widow,” 5.

²³ See, for example, André Resner, Jr, “Reading the text for economic justice: Mark 12:38-44 for stewardship season,” *Living Pulpit* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2003), 6-7. This is a classic appropriation of the text by a pastor endeavoring to pressure his own congregation into a similar degree of sacrifice.

religious system that demanded tribute from someone clearly so ill-equipped to afford it. Proponents of this thinking argue that Jesus does not actually praise the widow outright. Instead, he merely describes her action and issues an indictment of those in his company who have clearly been *less* selfless with their own resources. Here, a return to Malbon's school of thought proves helpful. With regard to entertaining multiple readings of a text alongside one another, she suggests this: "Not all readings are equal. Some are richer, some are poorer. But *many* are worth more than two [pennies], and the dynamic process of reading and of reading readings may be for some of us" a priceless pursuit.²⁴ With this in mind, let us set out to reconsider this story from a slightly different — if somewhat more complex — perspective.

Many of the interpretive studies on this passage demonstrate a tendency to depersonalize the widow. In his article, mentioned above, Addison Wright observes quite directly that "the widow is a little piece of fruit lost in the suffocating mass of leaves on the tree of religion and Temple."²⁵ While Wright demonstrates an awareness of this exploitative use of a human character, other scholars seem oblivious. In his 1998 article, Mario DiCicco forthrightly discusses the three ways in which Mark "uses the widow" to make a series of points.²⁶ This seems a danger inherent in any uncritical narrative examination of the text, of which DiCicco's is one. In an effort to create symbolically meaningful parallels and "object lessons," the specific individuals in the story are

²⁴ Malbon, "The poor widow," 5 (italics mine).

²⁵ Wright, "The widow's mites," 264.

²⁶ Mario M. DiCicco, "What Can One Give in Exchange for One's Life? A Narrative-Critical Study of the Widow and Her Offering, Mark 12:41-44," *Currents In Theology And Mission* 25, no. 6 (December 1, 1998), 442.

alternately depersonalized and utilized as inanimate tools for the demonstration of some moral tenet. In a sense, such an interpretation flies in the face of a compassionate reading, in which criticism is leveled at the religious structure of the day *precisely for ignoring real human situations in pursuit of grand ideological principles of generosity and self-sacrifice*. Somehow, this widow is compelled to put her last two pennies into the “religious collection” on the grounds that those in power have convinced her it is the right and necessary thing to do.

Who is this widow? She is, by definition, a woman who has suffered the loss of her husband, and as a woman she belongs to a historically disenfranchised gender group within the Jewish context (or most other contexts, for that matter). Despite being the central character, her voice is notably absent from this short story. In first-century Palestine, she would likely have been put in a position of needing to rely on the support and generosity of others, having lost her primary means of financial support (a husband). Here, a hermeneutic of hunger comes to the fore with great purpose, asking us to hear the voice of those in the margins. This lens requires us to seriously consider the perspective of any individual — here, the widow — who is on the edges of the community. Based on our knowledge of the status of widows in this historical setting, a hermeneutic of hunger shines a spotlight on this *particular* widow, who now demands our attention. From center stage, she now shouts the truth: forces beyond her control have conspired to bring about the situation in which she finds herself.

André Resner writes, "If leaders were to fulfill their responsibility to the widow, they would work a kind of justice in their leadership and preaching which would reverse

the conditions and effects of poverty and loneliness that plague widows."²⁷ Fix the larger problems, Resner counsels; don't applaud people's ability to survive them. If we are to take this story seriously from a narrative perspective, even Jesus seems inclined to use this fellow human person as an *object lesson* rather than respond to her needs. In so many other situations, Jesus responds to need with action, not a sermonette on the fortitude of the person in before him. In Mark 6:30-44, we are told the story of a feeding miracle in which Jesus has compassion for the physical hunger of his many followers. Earlier, in Mark 5:21-43, the gospel writer tells a compound story in which Jesus heals an undesirable and raises a child thought to be dead. Typically, when Jesus encounters an individual in need, he takes action. Thousands are fed, dozens are healed, and a few are even resurrected. Why, then, does Jesus encounter this widow, identify her dire need, and do nothing? Jesus rails against the establishment in the preceding verses, but — in rather atypical fashion — responds to the widow's poverty with platitudes and a total absence of action. Understanding, then, that this is probably not a story that *happened* (past tense), but rather one that very often *happens* (present tense), let us bravely consider that even Jesus' action (or lack of action) may be subject to critique.

A sensitive reading of this passage requires a different starting point, one that sees the widow as a human being. We are not given any insight into her internal disposition, so we have a responsibility to ask questions on her behalf. How much is she struggling as she drops her coins into the treasury? Perceived as a genuine human being with genuine human emotions, one must wonder what internal turmoil she feels as she drops coins that — more than likely — she desperately needs in order to survive. How is she able to

²⁷ Resner, "Reading the text," 7.

overcome her own sense of hopelessness, knowing that her contribution is just a drop in the bucket? Is she motivated by devotion? Is she motivated by fear? Does she have expectations of care from the religious community she is choosing to support? We now turn our attention to secular philosophy in order to discover what it might have to say about our approach to this pericope and in order to ascertain what this story might have to say to the larger world.

A Feminist Ethics of Care

We turn now to an ethics of care to see if and how it can interface with our exegesis of Mark. First, though, some definition is in order. Virginia Held identifies the central focus of the ethics of care as “the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of specific others.”²⁸ There are a number of significant aspects to this kind of thinking. Held asserts that it has the advantage of not being dependent on a particular religious tradition. She also asserts that the experience of care is a universal human phenomenon. “Every human being has been cared for as a child or would not be alive.”²⁹ This, she argues, makes the theory useful and applicable to everyone. Joan Tronto issues a caution that further supports the efficacy of a theory like the ethics of care. In observing that moral judgments tend to reinforce existing hierarchies, Tronto insists we must exercise care when making moral statements — be they entreaty or

²⁸ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

prohibition — based on long-standing social structures.³⁰ For example, the Judeo-Christian tradition has its origins in a deeply patriarchal culture and tradition. It should be unsurprising, then, that critical questions need to be asked about the androcentric principles that likely undergird its reasoning.

As will become apparent, an ethics of care contains the implicit understanding that the questions we ask about vulnerable people need to change. This does not go far enough, however, and I further suggest that an ethics of care can inform the conversation about what new questions need to be posed. Violence against women is a serious problem in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which provides a tacit foundation for much of the way we behave in the face of high-tension situations. An ethics of care asks how the exclusion of women from the biblical narrative has resulted in a worldview that still undervalues women's voices in global dialogue. It examines the relationship between the empowerment of women — known to be a primary indicator in assessing community stability and prosperity³¹ — and a renewed understanding of the appropriateness of violence as a means of resolving conflict. A pervasively expressed feminist ethic of care might change the assumptions that undergird both our theological understanding of issues like poverty and violence and the manner in which we approach meeting the needs of high-risk populations. These issues — and others like them — will be explored in the paragraphs that follow; and new foundational questions will be proposed as necessary

³⁰ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (London: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1993), 20.

³¹ United States Institute of Peace, “Women as a Barometer of Success and Stability? Sharing ‘Lessons Learned’ from Iraq to Afghanistan,” Panel Discussion (September 27, 2010), <http://www.usip.org/events/women-barometer-success-and-stability-sharing-lessons-learned-iraq-afghanistan>.

precursors to those we have tended to ask when determining how to approach both scripture and our fellow human beings.

It was stated in the introduction that violence is a necessary part of any discussion of the feminist ethics of care. Indeed, the assertion of military strength has been the shining badge of United States foreign policy for many years and is often touted over and above the way we exercise care for human beings both at home and abroad. This will take on even greater significance in our examination of U.S. policy in Liberia, discussed in section three. The doctrine of militarism is an ideology that reinforces a particular vision of masculinity and a particular understanding of the way in which societies are structured. Cynthia Enloe articulates the set of beliefs intrinsic to militarism. Among these core beliefs are “(a) that armed force is the ultimate resolver of tensions; (b) that human nature is prone to conflict; (c) that having enemies is a natural condition; (d) that hierarchical relations produce effective action; (e) that a state without a military is naïve, scarcely modern, and barely legitimate; (f) that in times of crisis those who are feminine need armed protection; and (g) that in times of crisis any man who refuses to engage in armed violent action is jeopardizing his own status as a manly man.”³² A feminist ethic of care takes issue with these assumptions, suggesting that most — if not all — are the product of programming and habit rather than of reality or nature. Tronto agrees, “Boundaries [of this sort] are human constructions, they are not natural.”³³

An ethics of care also asserts that morality is fundamentally interpersonal and relational. “This argument is in stark contrast to most justice-based moral reasoning,

³² Cynthia Enloe, *The Curious Feminist* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, Ltd., 2004), 219.

³³ Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 11.

which asserts that morality is about the objective application of universalizable principles among disinterested, disembodied individuals,” writes Fiona Robinson.³⁴ Just War Theory, for example, is predicated on the notion of a sovereign state led by a single, highest-ranking leader who is the sole person able to make a determination about the justice of engaging — or not engaging — in a particular conflict. This stands in stark contrast to the ethics of care, which would suggest that those perceived as being most vulnerable and in need of protection actually have a vitally important voice and something very important to say about the wisdom and long-term consequences of such a venture. In virtually any model based on a traditional Judeo-Christian ethic, however, their voices are excluded from consideration. This exclusion of particular voices should sound quite reminiscent of the traditional interpretations of our Markan pericope, discussed above.

I want to make clear that I propose the ethics of care not as *the* solution to the problems of poverty, exploitation, and violence but as an *important* solution — hopefully one among many — for challenging the assumptions we hold about vulnerable communities and for developing the questions that we should be asking well before the (seeming) necessity arises to engage difficult situations, ignore those in dire circumstances, or exploit the meager resources of the poor.

An ethics of care is based on a solid, ecumenical, and logical foundation. The most critical point to be made here is a reiteration of Virginia Held’s assertion, quoted above. An ethics of care is not based on specifically Judeo-Christian doctrines. It does not

³⁴ Fiona Robinson, *The Ethics of Care: A Feminist Approach to Human Security* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 5.

plant its roots in any particular religious tradition, nor does it rely on a holy scripture as a source of guidance. Its principles are those of secular humanism, egalitarian feminism, and basic anthropology. Thus, its foundational assumptions are fewer and more in keeping with the reality of our present world.³⁵ As Kimberly Hutchings states, a feminist ethics of care “is essentially a claim about the nature of the world we inhabit rather than a claim about what ought to be the case.”³⁶ This, then, seems an odd theory to propose in a paper that started out with an exegetical study of Mark 12. How can a theory that proudly situates itself outside the confines of the Judeo-Christian tradition inform a theological inquiry? Here again, though, the threads connect beautifully. Seen through the lens of an ethics of care — much as we saw when working with a hermeneutic of hunger — the widow in Mark 12 is seen as a real person dealing with a real situation not as the cog in some larger, theoretical wheel.

One shortcoming of traditional Judeo-Christian ethics has been the tendency to accept certain circumstances as inevitable. There is an enduring sense, for example, that poverty is an unavoidable reality in a “fallen” (imperfect) world. In Mark 14:7, the author has Jesus saying, “you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me.” This saying has been interpreted — literalistically and woefully out of context — as a fatalistic acceptance of poverty. In this case, a decision to uncritically accept the biblical text — even when it is words attributed to Jesus — has led to unhealthy expectations about the ontological nature and inevitable condition of human beings.

³⁵ Held, *Ethics of Care*, 3.

³⁶ Kimberly Hutchings, “Towards a Feminist International Ethics,” in *Review of International Studies*, special issue (26:111-130), 123.

Poverty is not the only such example. Just War Theory and — in the United States in particular — our insatiable thirst for violent conflict provides another illustration of the temptation to accept unfortunate circumstances as inevitable. “War has become our natural posture, our national default position, and we are more or less comfortable with it and its consequences,”³⁷ writes Robert Meagher. This is an assertion well supported by the work of scholars who have examined the United States and its history of violent conflict.³⁸

An ethics of care asks foundational questions that hold the potential to undermine these previously accepted postures. Is poverty truly unavoidable? Are the causes of poverty directly traceable to human behavior (rather than to divine will)? How does the expenditure of billions of dollars on war-making systems and devices speak to our willingness (even eagerness, perhaps) to make use of these systems and tools? How else might funds be spent that would suggest a desire to approach problems differently? What might happen in the world if the United States repurposed even half of the billions of dollars spent on war and used the funds to employ and empower aid workers, infrastructure builders and skilled diplomats? What if care work was valued (and paid) as highly as military work? An ethics of care demands that we ask such level-setting questions.

³⁷ Robert Emmett Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War* [Kindle Edition] (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), Kindle Location 409.

³⁸ See, for example, Fred Anderson and Andrew Cayton, *The Dominion of War: Empire and Liberty in North America, 1500-2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). This powerful volume documents violent conflict in North America beginning with the earliest arrival of French settlers in what is now Canada. Its narrative voice is striking, and it will not be lost on the astute reader that a *male* figure is at the center of each chapter. See also Jonathan Glover, *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999). In this tragic but beautifully written work, Glover surveys a global addiction to war that has claimed human lives at an increasing rate and left tragedy and destruction in its wake.

Fiona Robinson offers some answer to these important questions in the form of a new framework for what she calls “critical, relational ethics.”³⁹ Robinson directly addresses the work of Michael Walzer, challenging his rather unyielding ontological position on issues of individual rights, states’ rights, sovereignty, and national rights. She counters with an important statement that fundamentally challenges an assumption of the necessity for violence and traditional structures of power. “Moral reasoning about international relations must move beyond this fixed ontology, the principled, justificatory ethics, and the limited view of morality which currently characterizes international ethics, and towards a critical, relational ethics which refocuses attention on the permanent background to decision rather than simply on the moral criteria for making decisions and the nature of subsequent moral action.”⁴⁰ It simply is not adequate to craft artful responses to global crises without asking incisive questions about the reasons that such crises continue to arise.

In order to be meaningful, the ethics of care must demonstrate at least the potential for bringing about real change in the way that communities interact with and edify one another. A striking theme of Just War Theory, echoed in the USCCB Pastoral Letter, “The Challenge of Peace,” is the suggestion of a moral framework in which emphasis is placed on nurturing individuals capable of making thoughtful ethical decisions in fluid circumstances.⁴¹ The critical notion becomes that of building sound

³⁹ Fiona Robinson, *Globalizing Care: Ethics, Feminist Theory, and International Relations* (Boulder, CO; Westview Press, 1999), 142.

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Ethics of Care*, 142.

⁴¹ The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response, *A Pastoral Letter on War and Peace by the National Conference of Bishops* (Washington, D.C.: May 3, 1983).

character such that people are able to make “right” decisions at significant moments, even under duress. This entire concept stands very much in contrast to a framework in which one situates a particular problem or scenario against a detailed rubric in the hopes that an “objective” decision can be reached. Not only does this at least tacitly argue against the inevitability of any reality — war or otherwise — it argues *for* the very sort of worldview outlined in an ethics of care. Furthermore, an approach that seeks to build individuals of character who are capable of meeting unexpected ethical challenges in the world around them seems a task well-suited to communities of faith, creating yet another tract of common ground between the secular and the theological.

Increasingly, it seems that the nature of global concerns defy existing criteria, and leaders are called upon to make complex decisions that lay in the margins of previously understood categories. Thus, the notion of building moral people — and moral systems (institutions, governments, and so forth) — seems a better solution than building additional checklists for correct action, themselves also destined to become obsolete. It seems to me that even Michael Walzer, the veritable champion of Just War Theory and a rubric-based approach to military intervention, proposes a similarly character-based approach to international diplomacy. In the original preface to *Just and Unjust Wars*, he suggests, “we are not usually philosophical in moments of crisis.”⁴² While this would seem, initially, to be an argument for having a well-established rubric prepared for decision-making purposes, I would suggest that the opposite is true. Hard and fast criteria seem destined to result in equivocating and self-justifying behavior, particularly in the

⁴² Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), xix.

face of non-normative situations, if one (and here I mean the decision-making group in question) has not adequately exercised one's corollary moral "muscles." On the other hand, a person or group experienced in moral behavior, like that suggested by the ethics of care, is far more likely to act justly under pressure.

This issue of building people of character is a fascinating one, and it lies at the heart of an ethics of care. Without question, though, this process must become part of the fabric of our humanity without being linked to militarism, war, or violence. Thus, much of the writing on the ethics of care does not deal directly with war but endeavors to address the structures of power that so often grease the wheels of injustice. For one concrete example, I turn to the work of Ofelia Schutte, who has written on the nature of dependency work, its burden on women, and the subsequent effect on cultural development. Schutte's work examines specific data around dependency work: the lost wages associated with caring for a dependent, the minimization of healthcare and education to individuals (mostly women) involved in care work, and the importance of recognizing their labor for what it is, "work" that supports the fabric of society.⁴³

The volume containing Schutte's work — *The Subject of Care*, edited by Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder — treats several related subjects, each aiming to create an environment in which human beings are universally empowered, unstable communities are stabilized, and the appearance of necessity for damaging intervention is *avoided altogether*. Schutte's work is but one example among many; other articles consider, for example, the relationship between care work and justice. Virginia Held

⁴³ Ofelia Schutte, "Dependency Work, Women, and the Global Economy," in *The Subject of Care*, Eva Feder Kittay and Ellen K. Feder, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 140.

asserts “most feminists see morality as a matter of practice and art as well as of knowledge.”⁴⁴ This attitude is reminiscent of Jesus as we have come to understand him through the stories that depict him feeding people, healing infirmities, and advocating for the health and betterment of people on the margins of society.

A Case Study: Liberia

I turn now to a specific case study that I believe demonstrates the potential of a unified hermeneutical-ethical approach to improving the behavior of communities toward one another. In order to connect all of these threads, the history of the relationship between the United States and Liberia must be understood at least in its broad strokes.

The United States has had a long and complex history with the nation of Liberia. The latter country came into formal existence in 1822 when Black Americans arrived in Africa under the “guidance” of the American Colonization Society.⁴⁵ This effort occurred as a direct result of the United States’ struggle with racism and the enduring effects of — and response to — slavery on its own soil. More directly, there was a substantial population in the United States who believed that, while Black people had a right to escape slavery, integration with white people was an undesirable future.⁴⁶ This faction sought to repatriate African-Americans, sending them back to the African continent.

⁴⁴ Virginia Held, “Feminist Moral Inquiry and the Feminist Future,” in *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, Virginia Held, ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 153.

⁴⁵ Harold D. Nelson, ed., *Liberia: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: The American University, 1985), 3.

⁴⁶ There is an ongoing debate around whether (or when) to capitalize the words “Black” and “White” when they are used to describe a demographic group. See, for example, Elahe Izadi, “When to Capitalize ‘Black’ and ‘White’” (October 5, 2011) <http://dcentric.wamu.org/2011/10/when-to-capitalize-black-and-white/index.html>. Izadi merely poses the question along with rationale both for and against capitalization and asks his readers to weigh in. He also cites author Touré, who argues for the capitalization of ‘Black’ because it conveys a sense of ethnic identity. Touré rightly notes that Caucasian individuals often identify with some other heritage (Irish, Polish, etc.); thus he foregoes capitalization of the word ‘white.’ For the purposes of this essay, I am choosing to adopt Touré’s convention and rationale.

Robert E. Lee, the Civil War general, freed his slaves at the conclusion of the war and paid their way to Liberia.⁴⁷ Thus, the nation exists as it is today largely as a result of this repatriation of former slaves and their families. Since its inception, these Americo-Liberians have felt a strong connection with the United States and an elevated status based on what they initially perceived as dual citizenship with the United States. They tended to adopt symbols and practices that reflected those of the US, and their system of governance similarly reflected the democratic model found in the United States.⁴⁸

Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf describes the ward system that developed in response to this repatriation. As former American slaves arrived on Liberian soil, they discovered a heavy workload associated with life in nineteenth-century Africa. Many of them had relatively few children of their own, so the habit arose of hiring the children of indigenous families as workers. Sirleaf writes, “The American Colonization Society, recognizing how the tradition could be used to spread Christianity among the indigenous population, encouraged the settlers to take local children into their homes.”⁴⁹ However, the long-term ramifications of this system included a deeply divided culture with clear upper and lower classes. Many wards were mistreated,⁵⁰ and over time the stratification of the society would prove to have devastating consequences.

Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the United States — alongside several European nations — involved itself directly in the financial and political affairs of

⁴⁷ Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *This Child Will Be Great: Memoir of a Remarkable Life by Africa’s First Woman President* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 14.

⁴⁸ Nelson, *Liberia*, 3.

⁴⁹ Sirleaf, *This Child*, 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

the nation of Liberia. When the nation defaulted on a 1906 British loan, England attempted to enforce stringent reforms in order to secure repayment of the funds. Liberia asked the United States to intervene, which they did, eventually aiding Liberia with a multinationally-sponsored loan in 1911. However, in the chaos and recession that accompanied World War I, Liberia struggled to pay debt service on the loan and faced austerity measures once again, this time at the hands of the United States. When the U.S. unexpectedly terminated loan funding in the isolationist climate of the early 1920's, Liberia was left in the lurch and began looking for a private American corporation that might establish itself on their soil for the betterment of the national economy.

The Firestone Corporation was the first U.S. company to express interest in doing business on Liberian soil. This came in response to the increasing difficulty of importing rubber for use in American operations.⁵¹ After several years of inquiry and negotiating, Firestone officially was accepted into the nation of Liberia in 1926.⁵² Harvey S. Firestone is predominantly viewed as having been a generous and reasonable owner. Even so, the well-negotiated lease rate of six cents an acre for one million acres over a 90-year period placed the excess of benefit squarely in the column of the corporation.⁵³ Needless to say, considerable job opportunities and financial resources poured into the country as a result of the Firestone presence. They fell far short of Liberian expectations, however. In his 2014 article, Paul Farmer asserts that the Liberia government expected some 350,000

⁵¹ Wayne Chatfield Taylor, *The Case Study of Firestone Operations in Liberia: Fifth Case Study in an NPA Series on United States Business Performance Abroad* (Washington, D.C.: National Planning Association, 1956), ix-xi.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵³ Paul Farmer, "Diary," in *London Review of Books* 36 no. 20 (2014): 38-39, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n20/paul-farmer/diary>.

jobs to be created as a result of Firestone's decision to come to Liberia.⁵⁴ As the facilities were constructed, many Liberian workers — though not 350,000 — were hired on a temporary basis. Thousands were laid off when construction was completed, however, and by the mid-1960s, Firestone employed “only a few thousand Liberians.” Some 20 years later, that number had dropped to less than 9,000.⁵⁵ There was also an expectation that the presence of Firestone in Liberia would lead to corollary growth in related industries and an increase in Liberia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Over time, it became clear that a majority of revenue generated by the company stayed within its enclave and much of that spending power was ultimately redirected back to the United States. Furthermore, Firestone had negotiated a tax deal such that their payments to Liberia amounted to less than 4% of the nation's small GDP.⁵⁶ “Forty-six years after the entry of Firestone, the Liberian economy was still characterized by large, enclave primary industries, by foreign traders operating on a *caveat emptor* basis, and by a few wealthy Liberian entrepreneurs. The income disparity between the haves and the have-nots was huge and dangerous.”⁵⁷

Firestone's financial investment in Liberia also came with considerable strings. The Firestone investment came with clear requirements for a board of “advisors and auditors who were to be American.”⁵⁸ Many such conditions were frustrating to the Liberian government, and understandably so, as they reflected a deeper skepticism about

⁵⁴ Farmer, “Diary,” 38.

⁵⁵ Nelson, *Liberia*, 144-45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁷ Sirleaf, *This Child*, 70.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *The Case Study of Firestone Operations*, 54.

the capability of Liberian officials. “Both [Firestone and the US Government] believed that it was essential to bring some order into Liberian finances and both were convinced that the Liberians would not or could not do so themselves.”⁵⁹ Implicit in Firestone’s investment in Liberia was a sense that Liberians *needed* the help, which was undoubtedly true, accompanied by a sense that they would barely know what to do with that help once it was received.

The introduction of repatriated Black Americans to a populated region caused social relations to fester over time, and conflict was a direct result of these conditions. In 1980, the Liberian People’s Redemption Council staged a coup that unseated the elected government and resulted in the murder of the sitting president of Liberia, William Tolbert.⁶⁰ In a matter of hours, Master Sergeant Samuel Kanyon Doe became the leader of Liberia. “Justifying the action taken by the PRC, Doe cited the political oppression practiced by the [existing] regime as well as the corruption, unemployment, and the high cost of living that burdened the poor.”⁶¹ The situation was neither unique nor unsurprising, and the violence ensued swiftly and with devastating severity and longevity. Civil war endured for 23 years, and over 200,000 people died. Infrastructure was destroyed; entire industries were eliminated. Exports ceased, and years of educational development were lost. Countless women were widowed, and countless children were left without one or both parents.⁶²

⁵⁹ Taylor, *The Case Study of Firestone Operations*, 55.

⁶⁰ Sirleaf, *This Child*, 94.

⁶¹ Nelson, *Liberia*, 68.

⁶² I have anecdotal evidence on this matter. My husband and I have underwritten the education of a young man who – along with his two brothers and his sister – were left without either parent after the

The widows and orphans in the contemporary Liberian narrative are not object lessons or a theoretical demographic to be “protected.” They are real people, endeavoring to rebuild their lives with limited resources, damaged infrastructure, and a total lack of education. Furthermore, they are powerful, resourceful, and responsible for the redevelopment of their nation. Interestingly from the feminist perspective, the aftermath and return to sanity of their post-war era saw the election of the first female African president.⁶³ The war in Liberia was, according to the qualifications proposed by Enloe and described above, largely masculine in character; the presence of a female president was at least comfortable, if not necessary, after a series of vicious male leaders.⁶⁴ Sirleaf also requested the presence of all-female peacekeeping troops in post-war Liberia. This decision was made out of recognition that the war had been largely driven and carried out by men, with particularly devastating consequences for women. In order to restore women’s confidence and sense of security, Sirleaf rightly determined that an increased female presence would be both healing and helpful.⁶⁵ This type of thinking meets the criteria for both a hermeneutic of hunger — recognizing the individuals who have been most wounded and marginalized in a particular context — and a feminist ethics of care,

war. He has shared that many other young people are in the same situation; this is further confirmed by what I know of the population at the boarding school he attended until recently.

⁶³ I harbor no illusion that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s ascension to the presidency was without violence. There is some question and “shadiness” about her election. However, it was an historic election and did signal the end of violence in that nation. Peace has now endured for over a decade.

⁶⁴ The list includes – but is not limited to – Samuel Doe, Thomas Quiwonkpa (who staged an unsuccessful uprising in 1985), Charles Taylor, Prince Johnson, and Sekou Conneh (under whose leadership the ironically-named Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy started a second wave of fighting in 1999). For more details, see Sirleaf’s complete account of the years of Liberian civil war.

⁶⁵ Katherine Spillar, “To Defuse Police Violence, Hire More Women Officers,” Lecture at the City Club of Cleveland (July 24, 2015). In her talk, Spillar praised Liberia as one of only two examples of the positive outcomes that occur when women are heavily engaged in policing. While the report was part of a study urging U.S. police forces to employ more women, the relevance to this essay was striking.

which similarly demands that we heed the voices of those perceived to be “vulnerable” in a particular community.

Today, the foreign corporate presence in Liberia remains primarily exploitative in nature. The Chinese government completed the only paved road between Monrovia and Buchanan in order to extract resources more quickly from the nation's interior.

Unsurprisingly, there has been a consistent tendency for such arrangements to benefit foreign companies *more* and Liberians *less*. Aid worker Paul Farmer notes that countries in West Africa have been "wracked by extractive industries, which have never failed to turn a profit."⁶⁶ This type of exploitative and unethical behavior signals the importance of the questions raised by a feminist ethics of care — and a hermeneutic of hunger — as we seek to live in healthy community with others. Powerful nations and powerful companies seem no more inclined to ask these important questions today than they were during repatriation or during the advent of the Firestone Era. One might imagine a very different history for the nation of Liberia had these questions been asked:

- What relationships will be disrupted by this decision [to repatriate, invest, deny support, start this company, etc.]?
- How will this behavior affect existing relations of care?
- Does this intervention privilege or burden one race, ethnic group or gender?
- Is this decision motivated by an ethical desire to help the “other” in proportion to my own self-interest?
- Does this move place me in a healthy relationship with the affected parties?

Critics of this approach suggest that such questions are too far-reaching and idealistic.

Two realities must be acknowledged, however, and both support our case. First, if

⁶⁶ Farmer, “Diary,” 39.

Christianity — through vehicles like Just War Theory — can idealize a world in which the political machine can “fix” our world through armed military conflict, then an ethics of care can — and should — idealize a world in which the political machine can make determinations designed to eliminate poverty and violence and empower marginalized individuals. Second, and even more germane, these questions — however impractical they may seem in the short run — hold the potential to transform international relations and preclude the need for violent conflict with its resultant poverty and famine. It would be tragically short-sighted to ignore such tremendous potential on the grounds that it is “overly idealistic.”

Anyone living in the United States in the year 2014, undoubtedly was aware of the Ebola outbreak that swept through West Africa during the late months of the year. The epidemic affected over 25,000 individuals and claimed nearly 11,000 victims.⁶⁷ Every estimate available as of this writing suggests that the casualties will ultimately be far greater, with the disease and its aftermath affecting as many as 1.4 million individuals.⁶⁸

Historically, the international community has responded with substantial humanitarian presence and response in the wake of such crises. When a tsunami hit Japan in 2011, the response was tremendous.⁶⁹ When Typhoon Haiyan struck the Philippines in 2013 — killing over 10,000 people — the response was similarly effective, stemming the

⁶⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization, “2014 Ebola Outbreak in West Africa – Case Counts” (updated July 25, 2015), <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/outbreaks/2014-west-africa/case-counts.html>.

⁶⁸ John Campbell, “Confronting the Ebola Epidemic in West Africa,” Council on Foreign Relations Religion and Public Policy Conference Call (October 23, 2015).

⁶⁹ See, for example, <http://www.ifrc.org/japan>. This article highlights not only the immediate response to the crisis but also ongoing efforts to rebuild communities.

tide of death and destruction that invariably follows such catastrophic events.⁷⁰ However, in the face of so much suffering and death as a result of Ebola, the reaction was described as “pathetic.”⁷¹

The wave of Ebola in West Africa had corollary consequences that will continue to result in a much higher death toll than the raw numbers suggest. If one considers both the disease and the corollary damage done to food sources and infrastructure in the wake of the epidemic, the casualties turn out to be much greater.⁷² This is due, in large part, to considerable deaths that occurred as a result of treatable illnesses like malaria and dysentery that went untreated during the epidemic. Food shortages and high prices continue as a result of limited production and higher prices. In September of 2014, John Campbell, Senior Fellow for Africa Policy Studies for the Council on Foreign Relations, stated outright, "International efforts similar to the global response to the South Asian tsunami could help stop the spread of Ebola in West Africa."⁷³ Why, then, was a response so slow in coming? I assert that it was because — once again — important questions like those outlined above were not asked in response to the crisis.

What relationships will be disrupted by a particular decision? In the case of repatriation, the relationship between those Black Americans being “returned” to the African continent and the many individuals already populating that space was not

⁷⁰ See, for example, <http://ifrc.org/typhoon-haiyan>.

⁷¹ John Campbell, "Pathetic International Response to Ebola Thus Far," Council on Foreign Relations Blog (October 10, 2014), <http://blogs.cfr.org/campbell/2014/10/10/pathetic-international-response-to-ebola-thus-far/?cid=emc-RCC-background1-102314>.

⁷² CDCP/WHO, “2014 Ebola Outbreak.”

⁷³ John Campbell, "Ebola and West Africa: Three Things to Know," Council on Foreign Relations Video (September 29, 2014), <http://cfr.org/africa-eub-saharan/ebola-west-africa-three-things-know/p33526/?cid=emc-RCC-background2-102314>

considered. In the face of Ebola, the long-standing relationship between the United States and Liberia was ignored, disrupting the trust that historically has existed between the two nations.

How will this behavior affect existing relations of care? The burdens of stress and scarcity always disproportionately affect those who are already poor and underserved. In the case of Ebola, care work itself became a particular liability as those most involved in caring for family members and close friends became especially vulnerable to the disease.

Does this intervention privilege or burden one race, ethnic group or gender? Here, we must ask whether an absence of intervention signals that we are privileging or valuing one group over another. This is very closely related to the next question.

Is this decision motivated by an ethical desire to help the “other” in proportion to my own self-interest? Heroic measures were taken to save those American citizens who contracted Ebola, and U.S. interest in the crisis began in earnest when the disease found its way to American soil. I am certainly not alone in suggesting that the response to Ebola demonstrated a far greater interest in self-preservation on the part of those not affected by the crisis than a genuine desire to prioritize the care and well-being of the affected community.

Does this move place me in a healthy relationship with the affected parties? As a human community, we must learn to look much further into the future. If, at some future date, a number of people in the United States were to contract a dangerous disease for which only Liberia held an experimental treatment, we might well ask how our behavior during this most recent Ebola crisis would inform their decision to share — or not share — that treatment. Countless hypothetical situations can be imagined; the central point is

that our behavior must follow something of a “relational golden rule,” in which we take the time to consider whether our behavior paves the way for a healthy and mutually edifying future relationship.

History repeats itself. As with the Liberian civil war — a direct result of damaging U.S. foreign policy — exploitative and negligent behavior tends to have consequences long after memory of the events themselves has faded and people’s resolve has grown flaccid. The same mistakes are repeated, often with the same destabilizing and tragic results. As misguided and racist as were the efforts of the American Colonization Society, no one accuses them of having *desired* to destabilize a region. However, when key questions are not asked about the future ramifications of our actions, such destabilizing results seem likely. History has borne out this truth repeatedly and with unilaterally tragic results.

Two final statements will serve as a summary, and the former is more obvious than the latter. Tension will likely always be a part of this imperfect world. The threat of global climate change is increasing, waters are rising in many places, political boundaries are changing, and populations continue to grow in many locations. And here, our now-personalized widow is perhaps instructive. Based on what we understand about her social location, she probably should not have been the one to bear the burden of the treasury collection. Even if she was determined to give, the Temple was probably not the place to which her offering should have gone. Still, against whatever internal forces she may have had to overcome, she chose to do what she believed was right. A brief look at another story of personal sacrifice may prove instructive. In I Kings 17:7-16, a woman known only as the widow of Zarephath is asked (by Elijah) for a bite to eat. Her response seems

appropriate to her situation; she is forthright about her poverty. The story about her, however, progresses in a somewhat more comfortable manner than does the pericope in Mark 12:38-44. The widow of Zarephath is assured that God's abundance will immediately follow her generosity. Elijah sends her home with the promise that she can make him a morsel of food without fear, because her jars of grain and oil will never again go empty. The widow in Mark has no such guarantee. We can imagine that she feels similarly despondent about her own poverty, but she is given no assurance that her faithfulness will be met with an abundant return. She gives anyway; so while we might loathe the establishment that pressured her into misguided generosity, we cannot help but admire her spirit.

That being said, in some important respects, her story is not ours. It should be acknowledged that there are far too many individuals and families in the United States who are struggling to make ends meet. This is a sad state of affairs in and of itself, and many of those struggling individuals belong just as rightly in the center of this conversation about relational ethics as does the nation of Liberia. However, as a country — and this critique applies equally to many other relatively affluent countries — we are not the poor widow, standing with our last two coins in hand. At best, we — the United States — are the scribes, sourly commenting on the futility of those who make their small gestures in pursuit of change. Or, possibly worse, we presume to speak for Jesus. We stand at a safe distance, and we have the audacity to talk about the resilience of the Liberian people and the courage of the people who choose to risk their lives. These are not the “two cents” that are needed; all this talk occurs while doing absolutely nothing — not even two coins worth — to redress the problem. People love to question,

incredulously, whether they can be expected to respond to every crisis that arises in the world around them. The answer may, quite possibly, be yes. If we did — out of a desire to preserve healthy human relationships and cultural stability — then poverty, suffering, and the need for violent intervention would undoubtedly diminish.

The second summary principle is this: recently, the Ebola crisis ravaged West Africa not only because a disease found its way into the human population in West Africa but also because several tiny nations — Liberia among them — were left struggling to build infrastructure, educate their citizenry, advance medical care, establish a healthy political climate, and develop a system of food security without much in the way of foreign aid. And this might be acceptable if Liberia or Sierra Leone or Guinea were undiscovered tracts of jungle in some unmapped region of the world. But they are not. Liberia, in particular, is a complex and war-torn nation, largely as a result of our own struggles to acknowledge the value and personhood of Black people on our own continent, a battle that sadly continues into the present day. The United States set itself up as a supportive infrastructure — through loans, through corporate presence — yet also as a contributor to the strife — through the repatriation of former slaves. In so doing, a relationship was established and an implicit promise made to edify that community in exchange for their trust and contributions. Just as the woman dropped the entirety of her financial worth into the collection box, the Liberians surrendered their land — the basis of their very existence — for development. And yet, with the presence of so much industry, 33% of Liberian adults remain unemployed, over 60% live below the poverty line, and 83% live on the equivalent of less than \$1 per day. When crisis strikes — be it the loss of a husband in our Markan pericope or the loss of life and livelihood in the

Ebola crisis — there is a natural expectation that the structure to which one has contributed will provide aid and support in one's time of need.

If one universal principal can be proposed, it is that we must work *every day* to better recognize the humanity of our brothers and sisters of every color, ethnicity, disposition, religion, sect, mystical orientation, tribe, language, dialect, level of intellectual ability, level of education, or other miscellaneous characteristic. Indeed, recognition of the humanity of all of God's children and concerted effort to preserve their well-being serve as effective countermeasures against systems that would seek their own gain over that of individual persons. This is the shared vision and moral framework espoused by those who advocate either an ethics of care, a hermeneutic of hunger, or both. This is a vision of the world toward which we must all work.

Afterword: Taking Action

Two efforts in response to the Ebola crisis in West Africa bear examination. Though they are relatively small gestures of support, it seems appropriate in light of the pericope in Mark 12 to recognize that small gestures have the potential to generate substantial response. A number of churches in Northeast Ohio undertook efforts to sponsor families whose livelihoods were — and continue to be — destroyed by Ebola. Camphor Mission is a small Methodist School that employs 55 workers as teachers, administrators, and support staff. With the decision not to open schools for the 2014-15 school year, all such employees found themselves without a source of income. Through the efforts of the aforementioned churches, the salaries of those employees were covered until school resumed in March 2015, which means that 55 families were sustained

through the crisis. In addition to fending off physical hunger, the income and reliable source of food actually served to prevent their exposure to the disease.

The most significant part of The Camphor Mission project was a decision to personalize the individuals in need by structuring an “adopt-a-family” program with photographs and information about the families being supported. Participants were given the opportunity to sponsor an amount — ranging from \$50 to \$300 US — that actually represented the monthly salary of a *real human being* with a name and a story. Furthermore, it was striking for many donors to realize that the single salary they were providing would support not only the individual in question — often actually a widow — and her or his children, but also the nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles and cousins who routinely share living space and resources. In Liberia, a little money truly goes a very long way and touches a great many people. It is also notable that, in some cases, the personal relationships established through this gesture of support endured. Letters are exchanged and relationships have been forged. Those with resources will make certain — in perpetuity — that their new friends are always able to put shoes on their feet and food on the table.

A second approach is similar. Individuals are encouraged to permanently forge a connection with an individual — often an orphan, in this case — who is struggling to survive and thrive in the current environment. Here again, provision of financial resources often keeps young people out of potentially harmful situations. Such a permanent relationship also seeks to provide the necessary resources for the young person to pursue education when it becomes available once again. In addition to covering the cost of tuition, uniforms and food, these partnerships have also entailed such things as

sending basic piano books (for the days when a particular mission can afford to turn on its generator and power their small electric keyboard), providing school supplies, and emailing PDF files of literary classics in order that young people might continue their studies, even in the absence of formal education.

This approach is close to my own heart as it was the genesis of my relationship with my unofficially adopted son, Kevin.⁷⁴ Kevin showed up at Camphor Mission — a private, Methodist boarding school near Buchanan, Liberia — in the fall of 2011. Both of his parents were deceased as a result of the long civil war, and he and his siblings had managed to survive on their own. (I came to understand later that Kevin’s slightly older sister provided for them by harvesting cassava root in the jungle and selling it in the local market.) Kevin, however, wanted an education and a better life for himself and his family. In a simple act of hope and generosity, the school took him in without any funds to cover his room, board, or tuition. They felt it was the right thing to do and prayed that some means would come along to cover the expense of this extra student.⁷⁵

It so happens that I had done some freelance work around that time and had received a supplemental paycheck. I was aware that my friend Susan⁷⁶ was preparing to travel to Camphor Mission, and I asked her to carry the money over and find out if and how it might be put to use in the school. The headmaster immediately earmarked a

⁷⁴ This story used by permission. Even so, the name of my friend has been changed out of respect for his privacy.

⁷⁵ The Camphor Mission does not operate like a private school in the United States. Accommodations are austere, and students are fed only two meals per day. They run on an extremely tight budget, and it is not unheard of for the school to run out of food before a school year concludes. Most students do not have their own pen, pencils are often sharpened with razor blades, and paper is an unaffordable luxury. Slates are used instead. A single textbook or workbook to be shared among an entire grade is a luxury.

⁷⁶ This is not her real name.

portion of the funds to cover Kevin's room, board, and tuition for that school year. He was able to live, eat, and study for \$500 USD. Kevin sent my husband and me a letter in which he forthrightly asked for our ongoing help in order that he might stay in school and become one of the minority of Liberian young people who graduate high school. We have supported his education for several years now, at an annual cost that is — if we are being honest — somewhat less than the amount we might spend dining out while on a vacation. The relationship we have formed, however, is priceless.

In what I am told is a fairly common practice in Liberia, Kevin has taken to calling me “mom.” My relationship with my “son” has become a precious part of my life. Kevin checks in regularly via Facebook to ask how my husband, my step-daughter and I are doing. He worries about us when he doesn't hear back quickly enough, and he prays for my husband's safety when he is traveling for business. Kevin works hard in school and proudly reports back when he receives high marks at the end of each term. He joins his sister harvesting cassava on weekends and holidays to help with her family business. He sends an occasional grainy picture and keeps us apprised of meaningful events in his life. Kevin has even encouraged his younger brother to make the effort to attend public school in their hometown.

When the Ebola crisis hit, I was predictably afraid for Kevin's physical health, despite his assurances that he was taking every precaution. On top of his fear was layered intense disappointment over the government's repeated decisions to delay the start of the school year, a necessary precaution that nonetheless cost Liberian students over seven months of education. Most poignant, however, was my realization that food shortages and skyrocketing prices were making daily life very difficult for Kevin and his siblings.

As a woman who has only very rarely had to worry about the source of my next meal (and those occasions were very long ago), it is striking and tragic to hear from someone you love that they are completely out of food without money to buy more.⁷⁷

Needless to say, my husband and I have made sure that Kevin and his siblings always have rice on the table. I would argue that the reason we are so willing to provide for Kevin and his family is because of the relationship with have forged with them. We would no sooner idly sit by and allow harm to come to them than would any caring parent faced with the suffering of her or his own biological children.

In this latter case as well as in the former, the meaningful element is a recognition of the *personhood* of individuals in need and the tremendous resources they bring to a relationship. Relationships are powerful. Given that reality, there is reason to believe that such approaches could yield considerable success on a larger scale as well.

Conclusion

There is, in a sense, some antagonism between the notions of “justice” and “care.” This tension would seem to bear out in the case of our Markan pericope. It is justice that demands the widow’s sacrifice. After all, what is good for one is good for all. However, Robinson cautions, “It is not the idea of ‘justice’ as such, but the individualist, atomistic ontology, the liberal-impartial view of persons as ‘generalized’ rather than ‘concrete’, [sic] and the concomitant reliance on abstract moral principles which are corrected by the

⁷⁷ I chose the word “love” deliberately. It feels a bit out of place in a paper of this sort, but as Fiona Robinson writes (borrowing from Iris Murdoch), “we need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central.” Robinson, *Globalizing Care*, 13.

care perspective.”⁷⁸ It is not the case, then, that justice and care must be seen as oppositional to one another. Rather, that apparent opposition results from having adopted a narrow and unsatisfactory way of thinking about justice. As a universal set of rules that require unwavering obedience, justice is rendered cold and uncaring. As a relational approach to identifying the specific needs of another person or community, justice *becomes synonymous with care*.

This type of thinking is foundational to both a hermeneutic of hunger and feminist ethics of care. Together, they provide a powerful way forward that is at once broadly appealing and broadly relevant. In places where the Christian tradition has, perhaps, fallen into the habit of understanding justice *retributively* rather than *distributively*, an ethics of care provides a much-needed corrective. And where the ethics of care have been largely theoretical and held to the margins, their similarity with liberationist theology provides a fresh outlet and tremendous potential for growth. Most important, this unified ideology — with its flexibility and boundary-breaking character — has the potential to bring about real change.

“The ways in which we confront the profound moral questions arising from [global] issues will be radically and irretrievably altered when we renounce our principled moral theories of obligation in favour [sic] of a vision of ethics which recognizes the moral incompleteness, and the profound contextual inappropriateness, of an ethics which seeks to uphold impartiality by maintaining a depersonalized, distancing attitude towards others.”⁷⁹ We belong to a human community, a community of individual,

⁷⁸ Robinson, *Globalizing Care*, 25.

⁷⁹ Robinson, *Globalizing Care*, 8.

unique and personal human beings, a community that desperately needs to recognize just how connected and interdependent we are.

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