

A Widow's Might

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Crossroads Christian Church

Mark 12:38-44

November 8, 2015 Pentecost 24B

Last Sunday, we had a service of memory, memorializing all those from our faith family who had passed away in the last twelve months. We feel sad for their passing, but we affirm our faith that they are with a gracious and loving God in heaven.

Today, our lectionary scriptures call us back to pay attention to those who survived the loss of their dear ones. Our Old Testament scripture recalls the story of Naomi and Ruth; our Gospel lesson about the widow putting her offering into the temple treasury. They are stories of survivors; people of faith, determination, and courage who have survived the loss of the ones whom they loved; who have, after tragedy, rebuilt and redefined their lives. I can look around this sanctuary and see people who have lost their life partners, and who have each coped in their own way. To some extent, you may connect with these stories from scripture in a special way. All of us can learn from, relate to, and be inspired by the story of these three widows.

The book of Ruth is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible, but it begins in tragedy. Naomi and her husband Elimelech live in Bethlehem, a village in Judea. Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread," but a drought and famine hit that area, and they were forced to become refugees. The house of bread had no bread. The hungry couple and their sons traveled across the Judean plain to Moab, where they settled as immigrants. They were strangers in a strange land; the language, culture, and religion were all different than what they were used to. But they established themselves there, and eventually their sons married local women, Orpah and Ruth. Then, just when things seemed to be getting better, all the men in the family died—Elimelech, Naomi's husband, and their two sons-in-law as well.

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, to what remained of her biological family there. But when she said goodbye to her two daughters-in-law, Ruth said "I'll go with you." Naomi appealed to common sense. "I can't give you another husband." But Ruth persisted. "Wither thou goest..." Martin Copenhaver puts it this way. "In following Naomi, Ruth is not making a heroic choice as much as she is simply living out her fidelity to the one who has been given to her. Naomi keeps trying to reason with Ruth. But for Ruth there is nothing to talk about, because she does not approach this as a decision. This theme returns again in the concluding verses [the ones we

heard this morning] as Naomi and Ruth—who are, after all, unrelated—care for one another with the fidelity usually reserved for family.”¹ (unquote)

So Naomi and Ruth forged a different kind of family bond. Two women, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, remained faithful to one another. They journeyed back to Bethlehem, where things were better now—at least there was food to be had. After they returned to Bethlehem, Naomi told her old friends and family not to call her Naomi anymore, because that word meant “pleasant.” They should call her Mara, or Bitter, for life had treated her bitterly. Naomi’s life had been harsh. But Ruth hung in there with her, and their love and faithfulness was a role model for people around them. Naomi helped guide Ruth into a relationship with one of Naomi’s relatives, Boaz. Ruth brought a baby into the world who would be the grandfather of King David. Kathleen O’Connor says, “the God for whom Ruth abandons everything is the God of the lowly, the widow, the stranger, and the enemy.”²

Before we move on from Ruth and Naomi, let me just throw out a few observations. First of all, Naomi and Ruth, though vulnerable, had the courage to take a risk; to shape a new life; and that led to restoration. We see that, sometimes, when someone makes a career change in midlife to follow a dream, such as going to seminary; or when two older adults, widow and widower perhaps, or divorced, marry and form a new family, like Kurt and Margaret. Secondly, it reminds us that sometimes we make our own families. Families can take many shapes beside the traditional married mom and dad and children. For many of us, we feel that the church is a family of choice. Finally, it’s interesting that Ruth is one of the few women mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. This helps remind his readers, us, that Jesus was descended at least partly from a foreigner, an outsider, but one whose faithfulness to her mother-in-law changed the paths of history.

In our Gospel lesson, things are getting tense. This passage is set in Jerusalem, after Palm Sunday. More and more, tension is rising between the outsider Jesus and the religious establishment in Jerusalem. While last Sunday, we heard Jesus say that one of the religious leaders was “not far from the kingdom of heaven” when he accepted Jesus’ interpretation of the greatest commandment, today Jesus is challenging who put all their trust in and reap the benefits of the religious establishment, rather than trusting in God. They fell prey to temptation. It’s tempting to be a religious leader. It’s tempting to enjoy words of praise. It’s tempting to accept perks. It’s tempting to be the center of attention. And it’s tempting for prosperity

¹ Martin Copenhaver, quoted in *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word Year B*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p. 535.

² Kathleen O’Connor, , quoted in *Daily Feast: Meditations from Feasting on the Word Year B*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011, p 525.

gospel types to encourage viewers to give money to their cause that the viewers just can't afford—that's the modern counterpart to "devouring widows' houses." Jesus was challenging all that.

And right after he talks about religious leaders cheating widows, Jesus meets a widow—or at least observes her. Jesus and the disciples are mixing with the crowd in the temple, watching community leaders in their finest clothes make a big thing about dropping in large coins of silver and gold, clank, clank, clank. But here comes the widow, perhaps dressed in ragged clothing, perhaps waiting for a break in the crowd so she doesn't disturb the show being put on by the high and mighty, feeling out of place, feeling inadequate, but still wanting to give to God; and her tiny coins go plink plink. And she's the one that Jesus notices. The rich people gave from their excess funds; their leftovers. The widow gave all she had with all her heart.

We grew up hearing the story of the Widow's mite—m-i-t-e. But Jesus looked at the widow's might—m-i-g-h-t. He saw the might of her devotion; the might of her dedication; the might of her being willing to give all she had; willing to take a risk that somehow God would provide for her. It's not just about stewardship—it's about radical commitment and trust in God.

Dwight Lundgren helped me understand the story with these words. "As Jesus sits here within the precincts of the temple, on the threshold of the unfolding passion events, his attention to this unknown, impoverished widow gives insight into how he might have been thinking about faith, hope, and love—about the surrender of one's life out of both its abundance and poverty. In the mind of the writer of the Gospel, Jesus already knew that the days of the temple are numbered. The monetary value of the gifts of the rich and poor is practically meaningless. It is even more meaningless if the act of giving serves as either a distraction from, or denial of, living into the double love commandment. ..." He goes on to say about the widow, "Her offering is an expression not of her neediness, as great as that might be, but rather of her gratitude and trust. Her life its gratitude and trust, is the real treasury!"³

So we admire her dedication, her willingness to give all to God; we admire the faithfulness of Naomi & Ruth to each other and to God. On this Sunday before Veteran's Day, we remember and admire those in the armed services who likewise were willing to give their all, to put their lives on the line for God and country.

The stories also tell us about God. God loves us all, but God especially loves the poor; the vulnerable; those we often scorn because they have to cut corners, scratch and struggle. This God has the same kind of commitment to us that these mighty widows in our story had toward God. God was able to give everything; to risk everything in his love for us, by giving us all that

³ Dwight Lundgren, *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 395.

God had—in sending us Jesus Christ to save us and to welcome us into God’s family. What is our response going to be to that amazing gift, that incredible offering, that God offers us? Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon