

Year B, Proper 27

November 11, 2018

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

This week's sermon is supposed to be a sermon on stewardship. But, honestly, the Gospel passage this morning is kind of a soft toss to the preacher. I think the story of the widow's mite – the poor woman who gave abundantly out of her poverty – stands on its own as a stewardship sermon, and that's a good thing, because that's not where scripture and the Holy Spirit pulled my heart this week as I pondered what to preach, and the story of Ruth is where my spirit was drawn.

The story of Ruth seems to be quite straightforward: Naomi, her husband and two sons leave Bethlehem because of a famine and settle in the neighboring land of Moab. Moab is a nation often at war with Israel. Isaiah calls the people of Moab, "proud, arrogant, insolent; full of false boasts,"¹ and prophesies that, "...the Moabites shall be trodden down in their place as straw is trodden down in a dung-pit."² There is no love lost between Israel and the people of Moab. Think of it as a kind of Redskins-Dallas sort of rivalry, but with war. But there we find Naomi and her family – immigrants... refugees... in a foreign land.

Over time, Naomi's two sons marry two Moabite women (Orpah and Ruth)... and all is well... until Naomi's husband dies, followed soon by the death of Naomi's two sons, leaving Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law widowed. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, learning that the famine in Israel is over, begin the trek back to Israel (a foreign country for Ruth) when Naomi reminds the two women that Israel is not their native land, there is absolutely no reason

¹ Isaiah 16:6

² Isaiah 25:10

for them to travel the long distance to a land that offers them nothing but uncertainty. To which Ruth replies:

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

Our reading this week finds Naomi home in Israel with her foreign daughter-in-law, Ruth. Naomi, once the refugee in a strange land, now finds herself a poor widow in her own homeland. Ruth is now not only the immigrant and refugee in a strange land, but also a poor widow in a foreign country. The story of Ruth is one of loss and redemption as the widowed and childless Ruth eventually marries Boaz – a relative of Naomi, and a kind, wealthy landowner, and it appears that everyone lives happily ever after.

But the point of the story of Ruth is the story behind the story, for scholars believe the story of Ruth was written down in a time when Israel did not take kindly to foreigners. In fact, the story of Ruth seems to be a response to an order given by the Governor of Judea that not only forbade Israelite men from marrying foreign women, but in a cruel and horrific act of xenophobia and intolerance, demanded that all Israelite men immediately divorce their foreign wives and send them, and any children, back to their home country.

The author of the book of Ruth gives us what I would consider to be a “Christ-like” response to the hateful demand that foreign-born loved-ones be sent away. Ruth shows us that two very different peoples – different cultures, different religions, different languages – can not only grow to be loyal friends, but can be so devoted one to another, that each would be willing to give up all that they are to be by their side. The book of Ruth is a loving example of how the world could...and should be. Strangers treating each other as friends; differences seen as opportunities for growth and learning, loving one another without question, without condition – it is the Kingdom of God that we strive to achieve here on earth.

The book of Ruth is the kingdom of God that Jesus so often preached about. It is an ideal for which all Christians should strive. Unfortunately, rather than being an instrument of love, too many Christians use scripture as an opportunity to exclude others or use scripture as a license to mistreat others. I’d like to know, then, how often these same Christians quote *this* passage from Leviticus: “When the alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt...”³ Or from Deuteronomy: “For the Lord your God...loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁴ And, perhaps too often, Christians forget that our Lord himself was a refugee, fleeing violence, danger and murder, seeking safety in Egypt? And Jesus liked to remind his followers that when we welcome the stranger...we welcome Jesus.

In a radio interview this past week, our Presiding Bishop and celebrity preacher, the Most Reverend Michael Curry, reminded us that, “The further the church strays away from Jesus, it's going wrong. A church that does not care about the poor is inconsistent with Jesus. A church that

³ Leviticus 19:33-34

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:18-19

does not care about injustice in the world done to anybody is inconsistent with Jesus and is going wrong.”⁵

Ruth trekked over barren land to a country and people unknown to her, in search of a home; in search of safety and security – much in the same way refugees seek safety and security in our country - safety and security from desperate and dangerous conditions. The book of Ruth points us each to something greater than ourselves and reminds us that in the eyes of God, each of us – citizen, immigrant, refugee, rich, poor, black, white, brown – each of us... every human being is valued...every person is a beloved child of God. It's what Jesus taught. It's what Jesus would do.

AMEN

Ad maiorem Dei gloriam

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/06/664758057/bishop-michael-curry-wants-us-to-love-radically>