

## *Speaking of God and Widows*

23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost,  
November 8, 2009,  
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Ruth 1:16-18; 3:1-5; 4:13-17;  
Psalm 127;  
Hebrews 9.24-28;  
Mark 12.38-44

I've always felt a little uncomfortable when people start ascribing to God's hand every little detail of their life. You know what I mean. People late for a doctor's appointment will credit God with finding a parking place or hitting all the lights on their way through town. I certainly appreciate the sentiment. I know it comes from a place of faith and even more from a place of gratitude to God. I've never felt the need to disavow people of those ideas but it's not where I live. On the other hand, I also bristle at the modern assertion (by modern I mean post-Enlightenment) that God, if God exists at all, is like a clock maker who set the world in motion and stands aloof from that creation today as it unwinds of its own accord...that's not where I live either.

I think we all felt ourselves on holy ground last Sunday during the Life of Hope announcements when Earl (bringing greetings from the Greenpoint Reformed Church) stood before us to tell about the day two years ago when he came across some kid painting a fence outside a church in Brooklyn...a moment that brought a wandering soul back to the church and to his faith he had abandoned a long time before. It felt holy because in that brief story we saw a glimpse of the power that comes from the intersection between human spirits and the Holy Spirit.

Think about all that went into that moment. A church here in Holland, MI (Hope Church) that had a vision and a commitment to their youth ministry to send their high school students on mission trips every year. There were the students who cleared their calendars to be there to get away in the middle of the summer to work in the heat of the day painting a fence.

There was a man walking down the street with all of his history that brought him to that place. Then there were the pastors with a passion for the city of Brooklyn who work to make a difference against all kinds of odds. I'm not suggesting that God orchestrated that moment in some direct way by pulling some invisible strings or manipulating people and circumstances against their will. But I do believe God was there and I do know that I want to be open to those kinds of moments as they come.

The book of Ruth offers a story to us today that speaks to this question of how God's movement in the world and our movement in the world intersect. Interestingly, there is not a whole lot of conversation about God in the text. God is assumed. There is sense among the characters of this story that God exists and that the providence of God and blessing of God surrounds the whole of life. But God is not a direct actor in the story. There's not a whole lot of theology expressed here in the form of any explicit teachings about God either.

What we witness in this story is how two women who become family to each other discover the will and the way to pursue life and find hope after tragedy and hardship. In the midst of their choices and determination and scheming they do find that God is faithful to them. But what they discover is that the blessing of God is expressed and embodied through the devotion and loyalty of the people in their lives; people who were open to the cross-road kind of moments that Earl described for us last week.

The first moment we see this operating is when Naomi is overcome with grief and I suspect a fair bit of fear at the death of her sons. She is already a widow and now lives in the ancient near east without husband or sons, which means she is now without protection or rights. Ruth refuses to let her go alone and insists against Naomi's wishes to go with her. Naomi resists and in the part of the passage we did not read today she even seems to resent Ruth's presence when they return to Bethlehem. When she arrives back there she tells the women of her neighborhood that she went away full but has come back empty. Apparently Ruth's presence did not count for much when she made her way back home. She didn't see how bringing this foreign daughter-in-law back to provincial Bethlehem with her was going to work in her favor.

It reminds me of how often we mistake the workings of God's grace in our lives for some intrusion or distraction. We think we're focused on the right thing like the task at hand or the direction we are heading in our life and something or someone comes along and pulls off that track. We feel ourselves become annoyed or frustrated and anxious to get back to what we were doing or where we were going. It's only in retrospect we can see that it was the grace of God at work in what felt like a distraction. We realize that being pulled off the track was in fact an opportunity to get on a much better track that we would never have pursued if left to our own devices.

I imagine Naomi looked back on that moment in Moab many times through her later years grateful for her stubborn and devoted daughter-in-law who would not take no for an answer. These turning points come at several places in Ruth and Naomi's life. Sometimes they come by happenstance like the way that Ruth meets Boaz in the field where she was gleaning. And sometimes they come by careful calculation like when Naomi coaches Ruth to make that bold overture to Boaz at the threshing floor. All of it works together for Naomi such that the women of her neighborhood speak of the blessing of God being poured out on her through this daughter-in-law. It comes through this one she wanted to leave behind in Moab who in the end was worth more to Naomi than seven sons. (You have to keep in mind the context here where in the ancient near eastern world where security is dependent on boy babies. This really is a compliment!)

They attribute all of this to the blessing of God but none of it would be possible without the people and practices of this community. None of it would be possible without the devotion of Ruth or the provision in their community for gleaning which was a way to provide for the poor and widowed among them. Without that practice Ruth and Naomi would never have survived. And that's to say nothing of the loyalty and faithfulness of Boaz. All of this comes together infused by the grace of God to provide for Naomi's salvation. Then the text pulls the frame even larger to show how this story of God's grace for this widow fits into the larger history of Israel and the life of King David.

Speaking of God and widows, we move to this text from Mark today. If the story of Ruth provides a vision for the peaceable community then this passage from Mark describes its opposite. The phrase the *peaceable community* is used by Old Testament scholar Katherine Sakenfeld as a way to describe the community envisioned by the book of Ruth: "This is a portrait of a human community in which the marginalized person (the widow and foreigner) has dared to insist upon full participation, and in which the one in the center (Boaz) has reached out beyond societal norms to include the marginalized. It is a community in which children are celebrated and the elderly are attentively cared for. It is a community in which all are fed, and in which joy is the dominant note."<sup>1</sup>

Compare that to the scene in Mark's gospel. There the ones in the center (the scribes) make sure that they stay in the center in every sphere of life: the temple, the marketplace, the social scene. Everything from the way they dress to the way they pray is designed to keep their status and power. They do nothing to include the marginalized and in fact they contribute to the poverty and suffering of the widows in their midst: they devour widows' houses all the while maintaining this veneer of piety.

I appreciate this passage from Mark standing alongside of the one from Ruth because both of them in very different ways reveal this mysterious intersection where God's grace meets up with human freedom. As the plight of the widows in Mark's gospel makes clear: our choices matter. As the story of Ruth unfolds we see in beautiful ways: our choices matter.

But there is also a word of hope imbedded in both these texts today which is that there is more going on in our lives than we can see. Last Sunday we saw one little glimpse of how the life of our congregation intersected with the life of another.

I wonder how many times that has happened without our knowing it.

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<sup>1</sup> Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *Ruth Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), pg. 10. This "quote" is my paraphrase of her commentary.

I wonder when it will happen in your life and in mine maybe even this very week.

It makes life kind of interesting – doesn't it?

It makes life incredibly holy.

Thanks be to God for the mysterious way that God Spirit's is alive and at work in our lives and in the world.

Amen.