

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

## THE POWER OF LOVE

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

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Pilgrim Bud Precise

It was my intention to preach a stewardship sermon using the Gospel of Mark lectionary reading for today. It is a story that we all know, and we hear it often – especially when it is time for us to make our pledge to the church. What I discovered is that this story is not about our giving to church budgets. Jesus sat down opposite the treasury box – the place where people came into the temple to pay the temple tax. Many rich people came in and put in large sums. A poor widow comes in and puts in two small copper coins, worth about a penny. Jesus tells the disciples that she has put the most in the treasury that day. Others gave out of their abundance, but the widow out of her poverty gave everything she had to live on. It is not about an offering to the temple. It is about the temple tax. In the verse just before this story, Jesus condemns the scribes who “devour widows’ houses.” That means that the temple had the power to confiscate the property of the widows who did not pay the temple tax. This happened frequently. Widows – they are among the most vulnerable people in society. They had little education. There were not many opportunities for them to make a living. They had depended on their husband for the necessities of life. When the husband died, they were in a very precarious position. Jesus is really taking on the power of the temple and accusing them of “devouring widows’ houses.” When the widow could not pay the temple tax, they would lose the only thing they had left, their property. The temple actually had the authority to take their house if they could not pay the temple tax. You can understand why Jesus was not popular with the people who ran the temple. It ultimately cost him his life. In reference to our pledging, there is nothing in the text encouraging the disciples to be like the widow. Remember the Story of the Good Samaritan? It ends, “Who do you think was neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? The one who showed mercy. Go and do like wise.” There is no “Go and do like wise at the end of this story of the widow in the temple. There are reasons for pledging to the church, but this story is not one we can use and exhort members to “give everything they have to live on to the church.” So much for a stewardship sermon for today. Maybe next week!!!!

Today, I want us to focus our attention on the story of Ruth, found in the Old Testament just after the book of Judges and before the books of Samuel. The book is a story of the survival of a family because of hospitality of foreigners and the loyalty that comes through relationships.

Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons leave a place called Bethlehem (literally – House of Bread) because there is no bread. They go over to Moab because they hear there is food there. The choice of Moab is remarkable because there is great hatred between the Jews and the Moabites. They are actually seeking refuge in enemy territory. We often ask, “Where is God in times of upheaval?” The answer from our story today is that God often works through people we look upon as outsiders. The family settles down in Moab. Eventually the sons marry Moabite women and the family lives there among the hospitality of the Moabites for ten years. They had fled their own country because there was no food and they were welcomed in this foreign land.

We associate hospitality with being able to offer something tangible - like food or shelter. Here the family experiences the hospitality of the Moabites, even though the Jews and Moabites do not get along with each other. It reminds me of West Side Story, where a boy from one gang falls in love with the girl of a rival gang. Relationships enable us to cross boundaries. Hospitality crosses boundaries that we often think not possible to cross. I was in the line at the grocery store. At the check out counter across from me, a lady did not have enough money to pay for the food she had bought. Before she could decide what to put back, the person in line behind her gave her the needed money with the words, "I have two dollars you can have." Hospitality – from an unexpected source. This week people will go by the Greater Birmingham Food Pantry and they will leave with food for their family. Do you think they will know you left the food here as a part of your offering on the first Sunday of the month? They won't know where the food donation comes from. Hospitality often comes from an unexpected source.

After ten years, Elimelech and his two sons die. That is bad news for the three women. They women are left with no one to provide for them. Naomi decides to go back to seek shelter among her own folks in Bethlehem. She encourages her two daughters-in-law to stay and seek shelter and a new way of life among their own kin. They need husbands, a new family to survive. Although Orpah initially refuses to leave Naomi, she finally decides to return to her own people. But Ruth will not leave Naomi. She is intent on being loyal to her mother-in-law. Ruth uses the only words that we know from the book of Ruth. She says to Naomi, "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 will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die – there I will be buried." Hospitality – usually means being able to offer food, shelter, something helpful. Ruth is destitute. She has no food or shelter to offer Naomi. She offers the only thing she has left – her continued presence. In Greek, the word "xenos" can mean three things: stranger, guest, and host. These two women started out as strangers from different cultures. But over time in the shelter and help from each other, they have become guest and host to each other.

A second theme of this book is loyalty. Ruth's declaration to Naomi that she will accompany her to Judah is so firm, so matter of fact, that we can begin to recognize that she does not see it as a choice. It is just what one does. Yes, Ruth is free to leave – just Orpah did. There would be no shame in that. The author of this book does not condemn Orpah for turning back, and neither should we. Ruth is not making a heroic choice as much as she is simply living out her loyalty to Naomi who has been given to her. To her it is not a choice. This theme of loyalty, care for each other is usually reserved for family.

The family and the church are both places where we have the opportunity to learn to live with people we did not choose. Our loyalty to family and members of a congregation is like God's love given to us. This story of Ruth reminds us that God often works in surprising and unexpected ways. God often works through the most unlikely people – outsiders, strangers and the outcast. This story in Ruth shines a light on the nature of God's love in its generous capacity to come to us in times of trouble. It is the nature of God's love to welcome the stranger. If our seeking to be like God, we would do well to consider God's presence and love among the least expected people and at the most unexpected time. To me it is significant that among the Books of the Law, among the history of Judges and Samuel, we have this story of a family that struggled to make it. It is the story of their love and care for each other in the most difficult of times. The power of God is always revealed in love. It could be that as we stretch forth our hands, our words, our encouragement, our money, that we become those people who are willing to demonstrate this power of God's love. And maybe my sermon for today is more about stewardship than I realized.