

More Than Wealth

Ps: 127

Hebrews 9:24-28

Mark 12: 38-44

LESSON: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 (Courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

3:1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.

3:2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.

3:3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

3:4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do."

3:5 She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

4:13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son.

4:14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel!

4:15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

4:16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.

4:17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

This week's scripture reading from Ruth shows the tremendous transformation that has taken place in these women's lives since the story began. When they started their journey together, Naomi was trying to push Ruth away, and Ruth was the one insisting that she come along with her mother-in-law. Naomi was embittered and felt punished by God, with little hope. Ruth leaves her people and her land and binds herself to Naomi's people, land, and God. In this week's scripture we see Naomi taking the action for Ruth and Ruth following her suggestions, so that when she and Boaz become a family, a new family is given to Naomi via Ruth - and Naomi is reconciled with her people through Ruth.

This is, by man, considered to be the feminist version of the Job tale. Except that in this tale, the women had to do it themselves, and God never talked to them. In reading this book we see the delicate intricacies involved in restoring to these 2 widows to their secure place in society. Reminds me a bit of the saying that we are to remember that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did - but she had to do it backwards and in high heels! This singular piece of literature gives us an inside look at women from earlier cultures and mores, and yet, is astounding in that this tale has carried on for generations and these women are held in the highest of esteem.

This would not be true if it were simply an account of the miracle of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law who got along. Because, well, you know, that does seem to be a rarity if you hear all the in-law jokes. By the way, did you hear the one about the two mother-in-laws who were waiting for the grooms, who had been chosen for their daughters by the matchmaker? It seems that one of the grooms died on the journey there and the women were trying to decide which of their daughters was to get the groom that was left, so they went to the local Rabbi/Judge for him to make the decision. He thought he would try the Solomon tactic and claimed the man should be split in half and shared. To wit the first mother said, "No!" and the second mother said, "Sounds fair to me." The Rabbi then said,

"No need to split him in half - he goes to the daughter of the second woman, because she has the true mother-in-law instincts!"

While the fact that these two women got along so well is amazing and precious, and wonderful, there is so much more that we can garner from this story. Because what we have here are two women, who had little power in the world, but together through their love, hard work, intelligence and care, they brought about remarkable changes, so much so that they are an important part of our religious chain still today. Ruth is King David's Great-great Grandmother, and our Christian heritage has Jesus coming from that lineage. These women knew what it meant to be desperate, poor, foreigners and yet they overcame that and became renowned pillars of faith.

A Jewish theologian named Noam Zion wrote a paper on Ruth which I read most of this past week. It was an amazing 121 page study guide sharing some background information that absolutely intrigued me. She asserts that Naomi's husband had been a man of wealth and responsibility in Judah and when the famine came, he knew he would be responsible for the poor people on his lands, and in order to avoid having to care for them, he fled, showing no compassion and not taking on his responsibilities. And it was Ruth, a foreigner and a woman, who through her compassionate acts and hard work for Naomi, restored the balance and brought about reconciliation for Naomi and her husband's clan.

In our Gospel today we hear of a poor widow who contributes more percentage-wise than all the others who contributed to the treasury, because she gave all she had to live on, out of hope and faith. All these women have done whatever they could, considering their circumstances, and God favors them over the others, because they knew how to sacrifice, suffer, and strive to overcome injustices.

Perhaps this is what so many people need to hear and to know today, in light of all the news we are hearing. Unemployment rates went up, the health care debates can be disheartening, concerns about the environment, our schools, swine flu, terrorism . . . the list can go on. And we have before us today a story of two impoverished widows who struggle to travel back to a society that had scorned them, only to rise to places of tremendous honor.

Notice no mention is made of wealth for these women as it was in Job. The prizes in this story are, firstly, that the Lord had *not* left Naomi *without* next of kin, and secondly, the love that Naomi received from Ruth - "more than seven sons". The Child that Ruth bore became Naomi's kin as well, although Boaz was a relative of her late husband, not her personal bloodline. These prizes and offerings of reconciliation that the women received were made of grace, not of genetics.

So in this difficult time for so many, we need to keep our eyes open. Who in our lives is in need of grace and hope, and "kin"? How can we, like Boaz, become aware of those who are outside our circle of trust and respond to their need to be a part of our faith-clan? We want to take action to help and yet there is always a danger that we will be too pushy, or worse, not inviting enough.

A life of prayer can bring us centeredness which helps us to be at home in our hearts, where Christ comforts us. And when we have built our home of faith, then miracles occur - we become aware of things that we had overlooked before, and our compassion causes us to reach out and help as we are able. It can't be contrived, it is a natural reaction to a life of trust, that we become aware of those who need a family of grace, and we can offer it to them.

Ruth worked hard and that got Boaz's attention. But Boaz was extraordinary, he was wise and saw things in Ruth that others overlooked. And it wasn't all about sex. Boaz and Ruth's tale is historic for the empowerment that came about as a result of their relationship, not because of the innuendo.

Empowerment is a delicate balance, and Naomi and Ruth were quite aware of that. They had to find a way to gently make this strong and wise man, Boaz, aware of their desire to be a part of his family. He had to be sensitive enough to perceive the extraordinary opportunity which lay before him. Boaz and Ruth's union was one of particular respect and care. Naomi and Ruth's bond was one of extraordinary love.

May we have Boaz's eyes so that we may sense how we can help those who may be struggling at this time, Ruth's love so that we have the determination to help those who are weaker to find their way home, and Naomi's wisdom to discover the delicate balance needed to empower and not to enslave.

Let us pray together the Prayer of St. Francis found in your hymnal, #468.