

The 25th Sunday after Pentecost
November 11, 2018
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Psalm 127
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

There's a lot for us to notice in this morning's gospel. Jesus talks about the scribes and their long robes, the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, the places of honor at banquets.

And Jesus sits down across from the Temple treasury – a space designed to make folks notice the hullabaloo there. Thirteen large, metal, trumpet-shaped receptacles ... put there to receive the coins that were offered and crafted to amplify the sound of the coins as they rattled and rolled their way into the coffers. Jesus sits there, watching the crowd as they put in their coins. You couldn't help but notice whenever a large donation came in – the larger the coin, the larger the racket; the more numerous the coins the more cacophonous the disturbance.

And as all this is going on, along comes a poor widow who quietly drops in two small coins ... *lepta*, they were called, the smallest coins in the realm. Hardly big enough for anyone to notice.

Except, of course, Jesus does notice. He sees her. He sees her as a person. He sees her plight and her offering. And then Jesus calls the disciples over to make sure they see her, as well. The scribes take advantage of people like her, Jesus had just been telling them. And everyone else overlooks her. But even as he condemns the system that's put her in such a precarious spot, Jesus commends her.

There's another woman we could easily fail to notice this morning, even though there's a whole book of the Bible that bears her name. That would be Ruth, of course. She's worth our noticing.

It'd be easy to overlook her. We only read from the Book of Ruth twice in our three-year lectionary. Actually, because we have two options for the first reading this time of year, it's more like twice every *six* years. And since one of those times is typically preempted because of our celebration of All Saints' Day, it all really comes down to just once every six years.

If not for All Saints' Day last week, we'd have heard the beginning of Ruth's story last week. Perhaps you remember how it goes. The long and the short of it is that Ruth and Orpah, a couple of Moabite women, marry into a Jewish family who came to Moab from their home in Bethlehem. But then all the men die and all three of the women are made widows ... which is to say, they're pretty much on their own – and their prospects are poor.

Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, decides to return to Bethlehem, in the hopes that maybe her kinfolk can help. And she encourages the younger women to return to their own kin, too, hoping someone in their families might show them a little pity there.

Orpah takes her up on the offer. Ruth rejects the idea, and pledges herself to Naomi in some of the most lovely and evocative language of the Bible:

*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.*

Ruth 1:16b-17a

And as far as she was concerned, that was that.

You could read the rest of the story in just a few minutes; it's only about four pages long in the Bible. It tells us that from then on, the two of them were inseparable. And that Ruth was as good a daughter to Naomi as Naomi could ever have imagined or hoped for – and then some. Ruth got up early each day and went out to glean the grain missed by those harvesting the fields there. It couldn't have added up to much, but it was enough to keep them both alive.

That's what I notice. Working together, they manage it. For all the reasons why they shouldn't have bothered, they keep faith with one another. In spite of their differences in age and nationality and religion, they work together for their common good. That's worth *our* noticing in our own day.

A man named Boaz noticed. On one of those days when Ruth was out gleaning in the fields, he notices Ruth gleaning in his field and he asked who she was. After hearing about her, he invites her to stay and work his fields and he'll make sure she'll be safe and that she'll be able to gather enough food to get by.

In the typical fairy tale telling, we'd probably think it was her beauty that caught his eye. But when Ruth asks Boaz why he, a Jew, was being so kind towards her, a Moabite, he tells her that it's because of her kindness and her steadfast care for her mother-in-law.

And before the whole story is done being told – in the midst of the verses we skip over in our reading this morning, actually – Boaz calls Ruth *eshet chayil* ... a woman of valor. She's the only woman for whom that particular title is given in the whole of the Bible. ⁱ

Some of you will remember the phrase. I made quite a deal about it back in September when we read a passage from Proverbs describing what was translated for us then as "a good wife." But as I told you then, "a good wife" is a wholly inadequate translation.

In a patriarchal world, men didn't need to notice women. But Boaz notices Ruth and praises her highly. *Eshet chayil* ... a word of praise, acknowledging the value and valor of a woman; and it's a word of blessing.

A guy named Ralph Milton imagines some of what Boaz thought about Ruth and what he said to her. Milton's monologue captures what *eshet chayil* might mean for Boaz:

Part of my daily prayer was to say, "Thank God I was not born a woman," and now, suddenly, I knew why. I was far too weak to be a woman. I would long ago have been crushed by the pain and circumstance Ruth and Naomi had faced.

"Thank God I was not born a woman," because I could never do what Ruth had done, simply to stay alive. Nor did I have the loyalty and commitment she had showed, when she followed Naomi into a strange and distant land.

And then I knew I needed Ruth. Not for the sex and not for the comfort but for the sheer strength and will and hope that lives in such a person.

"Ruth," I said. "If I can work it out, will you marry me?" ...

"Not for your sake, Ruth. For mine. I have power, but you have strength. As a male, I have rights, but you have purpose." ⁱⁱ

I'm reminded of what St. Augustine once said: "Pray as if everything depends of God. Act as if everything depends on you." The Book of Ruth could have inspired the thought.

Yesterday, at an event over at St. Helens, Marianne Borg spoke about the God of supernatural theism – the kind of God we imagine to be pulling all the strings, for good and for ill.

Naomi sounds like someone who believed in that kind of a God. After her husband and sons had died, she says God dealt her the blow. And when she returns to Bethlehem, everyone greets her, "Naomi! Naomi!" But she tells them, "Call me Bitter, because God ruined me." Then, when Boaz had started to take an interest in Ruth, Naomi announces that God has remembered her again.

For Naomi at least, God gets the blame, and God gets the praise. Always.

And yet for all that, neither Naomi nor Ruth ever act like they believe it; they're never passive. They demonstrate agency; they're active both in the face of all adversity and in the times of any opportunity. They may pray as if everything depends of God, but their prayer never stops them from taking action ... as if everything depends of themselves.

And notice, if you will, just how far they're willing to go. This morning we hear about Naomi's plan, the one Ruth puts into action. It's a bold and daring plan, brazen even; it's risky, and potentially scandalous. Ruth waits until Boaz has had too much to eat and drink and then, when he's asleep on the floor, she "uncovers his feet." Some scholars say it doesn't mean anything; it's just his feet. Others say it's a pretty clear euphemism for uncovering more than the man's feet. Either way, it's bold and risky and potentially scandalous.

And this is the precise moment, in the dead of night on the threshing room floor, when Boaz pronounces his blessing: *eshet chayil*. Boaz notices Ruth's devotion and hard work, sure. But his highest praise comes as he sees and praises her agency, her bold willingness to do whatever it takes to secure her future, to keep faith and take care of her mother-in-law.

Those are all reasons why I hope we don't overlook them, why we might notice them: for their ability to work together for the common good; for their care and industry; and for depending on God, even as they do the things God needs them to do.

And, like the widow in this morning's gospel, that's why we might commend them for what they show us. *Eshet chayil*, I say, to all.

And there must be others we overlook. Perhaps they're not flamboyant or loud. But so many others keep the faith and show us what to do, how to live.

Eshet chayil: words of praise for a woman of valor. Back in September I suggested you use the words when you notice others, women in particular, acting in ways that ought to be seen by us.

Eesh chayil: the equivalent for a man. (At least I think that's what it is.) Men, too, can be overlooked. It behooves us all to notice them when they deserve to be praised.

And perhaps when you look at yourself in the mirror, it'd be worth remembering to say the words to the person looking back: *eshet chayil ... eesh chayil*. Encourage that person to show some valor in this world, whether anyone else notices or not.

ⁱ The text reads: "... all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman" (Ruth 3:11b). As I said about "good wife," I'll say here: "worthy woman" (though better) still falls short of "woman of valor." (See also Yael Ziegler @ <https://etzion.org.il/en/ruth-woman-valor>.)

ⁱⁱ A brief excerpt of Ralph Milton @ <http://ralphmiltonsrums.blogspot.com/2009/10/preaching-materials-for-november-8-2009.html>. The full text (almost as long as the whole Book of Ruth) follows:

Boaz remembers. . .

The story of Ruth who had no other options
by Ralph Milton

I am a decent man. I have a reputation to maintain. I live a decent life and say my prayers daily. I thank God for many things, and most especially I say the prayer prescribed for all Jewish men, "Thank God that I was not born a woman."

Mostly I steer clear of women. They spell nothing but trouble, and in a small town like Bethlehem, there are no secrets.

So when I woke in the middle of the night, naked, my cloak pulled up to my chest, a shudder of fear ran through me. And then, in the darkness, I became aware of a woman beside me. I could hear her breathing. I could feel the warmth of her body. I knew I was in trouble. Deep trouble. My head was pounding and I felt sick to the stomach, from fear and too much to drink. What kind of mess have I gotten myself into?

It was the last night of the threshing season. Big celebration. Lots of good food and lots and lots of wine, and everyone ate and drank and partied till the wee small hours, until they passed out somewhere on the threshing floor. And yes, a lot of men and women got mixed up with each other – they do every year – but I always thought of myself as too smart to fall into that trap.

Now this. And I didn't even know who this woman was. It was the middle of the night. She put her face close to mine and whispered, "I am Ruth."

"Ruth? Ruth who? I don't know any Ruth."

"I am Ruth, the woman from Moab. I am the daughter-in-law of Naomi, your kinswoman. You were very kind to me and helped me glean grain from your fields. You protected me and gave me food."

Then the whole thing came clear to me. I do her a favor. She pays me back by giving me her body.

"Damn," I whispered loudly. Then more quietly because I didn't want to wake up any of the other drunken bodies scattered around the threshing floor – "I thought you were something more than a prostitute. Do you think I let you glean in the fields just so I could get you into the sack?"

I could feel her stiffen and sit up. "I should have known. I should have bloody well known that no man would understand this."

"Quiet," I whispered. "You'll wake everybody up."

"Let them wake up," Ruth hissed. "And I'll give them a little lecture about what it's like being a woman. A woman is just half a human, remember. I have no rights. I have no place I can go back to, and no place I can go forward to. I am a foreigner in this country, I am a widow, I have no father and no sons. All I have is a mother-in-law who schemes and plans and figures that if I come here and seduce you, maybe you'll marry me. But you wouldn't know what it's like to have your back against the wall, to have no options, no choices and no hope. It's no wonder you men pray, 'Thank God I was not born a woman.' I would too. Men have all the power and all the choices and I have no power and no choices except the power of sex and so I turn myself into a prostitute in the wild hope that you might marry me."

I couldn't see her in the dark but I could feel her anger and her pain. And I could remember her face. I had seen the grim determination in her eyes and in her body as she worked in the blazing sun from early morning till late at night, breaking her back to pick up the few little heads of grain missed by the harvesters. And I had heard her story gossiped in the streets of Bethlehem, how hope had turned to pain and death in her native Moab, of her dedication to her mother-in-law. I had envied her courage, her strength, her commitment. Now I could hear her deep and angry breathing as she sat there beside me on the threshing floor.

She was right, of course. Part of my daily prayer was to say, "Thank God I was not born a woman," and now, suddenly, I knew why. I was far too weak to be a woman. I would long ago have been crushed by the pain and circumstance Ruth and Naomi had faced. "Thank God I was not born a woman," because I could never do what Ruth had done, simply to stay alive. Nor did I have the loyalty and commitment she had showed, when she followed Naomi into a strange and distant land.

And then I knew I needed Ruth. Not for the sex and not for the comfort but for the sheer strength and will and hope that lives in such a person.

"Ruth," I said. "If I can work it out, will you marry me?"

"No," she said. "If it means death, so be it, but I won't sell myself again, just to survive."

"Not for your sake, Ruth. For mine. I have power, but you have strength. As a male, I have rights, but you have purpose. Without you, I am incomplete."

There was a long, long silence. Then in the darkness of that threshing floor, she took my hand.