

Pentecost 23B 2009
Proper 27
Tests: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
 Psalm 127
 Hebrews 9:24-28
 Mark 12:38-44

“ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything that she had, all she had to live on.” Mark 12:44

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

In today’s readings we have two poignant stories. Stories that start in tragedy and end in hope, stories where the main characters are marginalized from their communities yet give all they have to be a part of the community once more.

In the Old Testament reading we have the story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi and her husband Elimelech, Israelites living in Bethlehem of Judah, leave their hometown and go to Moab due to a famine. The word Bethlehem ironically means “house of bread.” Naomi and Elimelech leave their house because there was no grain harvest that would enable them to make their daily bread.

Naomi and Elimelech had two sons who married local non-Israelite women, Orpah and Ruth. About 10 years after arriving in Moab Elimelech and both his sons die leaving Naomi and her two daughters in-law widows.

Widows at that time were the most vulnerable population. If a widow did not have a male family member that agreed to take care of her she was left to fend for herself. This was often a death sentence.

The famine was over in Judah and Naomi decides to head back to Bethlehem to try and find some security. She tells her daughters in-law to return to their families. Orpah returns, but Ruth pledges her loyalty and love to Naomi and refuses to leave her.

It just so happens that they return to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. It was customary at that time to allow widows to glean

the leftover seeds in the fields. Ruth starts to glean the edges of the field of a man by the name of Boaz. Boaz happens to be a relative of Naomi. Ruth comes to his attention because of her hard work and loyalty to her mother in-law. Boaz tells the reapers in the fields to leave her alone, to let her pick up as much as she can. Boaz even tells the workers to take out some of the sheaths of barley and leave them for Ruth to take.

When Naomi finds out that Ruth has been collecting seed from Boaz she realizes that he is the one that can turn this situation around for them and give them security. She tells Ruth to make herself attractive to Boaz and to go to him. She does just that. As he is sleeping she lays next to him and stays with him until early the next morning. Boaz promises to make Ruth his wife, which he does. She conceives and bears a son by the name of Obed who will be the grandfather of the greatest King Israel will ever know, King David.

In the gospel reading we have the story of another widow. We are not told her name only that Jesus takes notice of her in the temple. Jesus has been teaching in the temple for several days. He has had debates with the scribes and Pharisees about honor, authority and power.

Jesus watches as they parade around in their fancy robes and jockey for prestige by where they sit at banquets. He sees what they give to the temple and the show they make doing it. The widow quietly arrives to pray and in doing so places two copper coins, the smallest denomination available, into the treasury box.

Jesus sees this and calls his disciples over to him. These are the same followers that just a few days before were arguing amongst each other about who would be the greatest, and who should sit at Christ's right and left hand. It wasn't just the scribes and Pharisees that didn't understand where true honor, authority and power came from, Jesus' own followers didn't get it either.

Jesus tells them what happened and says, "truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have given out of their abundance; but out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

Two stories featuring the most vulnerable members of society. Two stories where the women gave all that they had. Ruth didn't even have two copper coins, she only had herself, and so that was what she gave. Three women who suffered loss, were in jeopardy, and took the risk to hope for something better. Three women who were dependent upon the compassion of others to survive.

Naomi and Ruth were dependent upon the compassion of Boaz. Ruth was a foreigner, Boaz owed her nothing. But out of Ruth's fidelity and love for Naomi, Boaz's compassion was stirred. Out of the risk Ruth took in what was a rather brazen overture to Boaz, new life for Naomi, Ruth, indeed all of Israel, was assured.

The widow in the temple risked everything she had to live on, but she trusted in God's providence. She remained faithful even when the religious system she was a part of exploited her poverty. But poverty is a relative term. The scribes and Pharisees may have seen her as poor, but I wonder if she saw herself as poor. Jesus tells his disciples that the woman was richer in faith and spirit than the rich scribes would ever be.

Risking anything is challenging. We are a culture that loves our control, or at least the illusion of it. Depending upon the kindness and compassion of others is something often seen as a weakness. Yet, it is when we make ourselves vulnerable to others that real ministry takes place. It is when we risk our control that we realize that we are never really in control to begin with and that it is we who are ministered to.

Dan Handschey, the rector of Advent-Crestwood, tells the story of his first trip to Lui in Southern Sudan. As you know we have a companion relationship with the Diocese of Lui and send members from the our diocese over there twice a year.

Dan went over there last year. He said he woke up one night in a full blown panic attack. His heart was racing, he was sweating, he couldn't breathe. He did the only thing he could do in a foreign country at two in the morning with no way of getting home; he started to pray.

In his prayer he came to the realization that what had sparked the attack was the realization that he wasn't in control. His very survival

depended upon the kindness and compassion of his fellow Christians in Sudan to meet his needs. Without them to guide him, to save him from himself, he would die. He wouldn't have lasted 48 hours without his hosts.

"I had to give up any idea that I could possibly be in control of anything," he told me. "I had gone to minister to these people and I had to give that up and realize that the one who needed to be ministered to, was me. There I was, a guy with two PhD.'s, richer monetarily than these people would ever be, and it didn't matter at all. I didn't have the knowledge to survive where I was."

Dan will also tell you that it was the most powerful and necessary lesson he has ever learned and he believes it saved his spiritual life. When Dan came to the realization that he wasn't in control, that he just had to trust in God and his hosts, a peace the likes of which he has never felt before washed over him. He felt lighter and more hopeful than he thought possible. And he slept like a baby the rest of the trip.

What control do we need to give up? Whose compassion do we need to depend on? What is it that we need to do, what is it that we need to risk, as a community of faith, to assure that the new life we have been given together continues? Whose ministry do we need to accept?

We can ask ourselves these questions and not be afraid of the answers. We can put all that we are and all that we have in God's hands, trusting in his compassion and providence. We can make ourselves vulnerable to those outside our doors knowing that when we do so we are the ones enriched and blessed as much as those we seek to help.

Naomi and Ruth. The unnamed widow. They gave all that they had and all that they were and believed in God's promises of new life. May we all be just as faithful.

Amen.

