

Sermon – “Restorer of Life”

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5, 13-17, Mark 12:38-44

Sunday, November 11, 2018

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D. Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17. The Book of Ruth is a story of a daughter and mother-in-law and their determination to survive following the tragic deaths of their husbands. Last Sunday we journeyed with Ruth and Naomi home to Bethlehem – the house of bread – where Ruth gleanes the leftover wheat from the fields of Boaz who happens to be a distant kinsman on Naomi’s late husband’s side. In today’s reading, we find ourselves privy to a pivotal conversation between these two widows; and the marriage and son that grow out of their plans and initiative. When Naomi encourages Ruth to visit Boaz at the threshing floor she is appealing to the marriage law that requires the nearest male relative of the deceased to marry the widow. This law was established within the Hebrew community in antiquity to protect widows in a patriarchal society. Hear now, God’s word.

*1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 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 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. 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." 5 Ruth said to Naomi, "All that you tell me I will do." (pause)*

*13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 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! 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." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 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. Amen.*

Jesus introduces us to another widow in our second scripture reading, Mark 12:38-44. She arrives at the temple giving her last two coins following Jesus’ criticism of the religious leaders whose piety and pretention mask their ruthless exploitation of the poor, in particular widows. In this final public scene of Jesus’ ministry, the widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about to do. On his way to the cross Jesus, the restorer of life, will give “everything he had” to bring redemption to our broken world. Hear now God’s holy word.

*38 As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." 41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Amen.*

The title of the sermon: Restorer of Life

The text: *Then the women said to Naomi, "... 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." Ruth 4:14a,15*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we give you thanks for those who have given their all and for those who nourish our spirits and restore our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

When the hostilities of the first great war ended at the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month one hundred years ago, ten million soldiers had lost their lives and seven million civilians died within the conflict. The United States of America lost 117,000 sons. The names of our sons who served appear on the bronze World War I Memorial Plaque in the East Narthex which was dedicated shortly after the end of the war. Today, we will join our voices with those who came before us by sharing in the Litany of Dedication for this historic plaque.

The sermon preached from this pulpit on Sunday, November 10, 1918 by the Reverend Dr. S. Willis McFadden was entitled "Seven Doors of Opportunity." An article in the Daily Illinois State Journal published the next day on November 11th described Dr. McFadden's sermon as a plea to his congregation to give generously to support the United War Work Campaign which began that morning to raise funds for the servicemen overseas. "What will we give of ourselves?" he asked as he emphasized that the work of the seven welfare organizations, (the doors of opportunity), which included the American Library Association, Jewish Welfare Board, Knights of Columbus, the Salvation Army, War Camp Community Service, Young Men's Christian Association and Young Women's Christian Association, was non-sectarian in character and deserved the earnest support of every patriotic American, regardless of religious belief. This is yet another example of the spirit of respect, generosity, and inclusion that has been a part of this congregation since its founding in 1835 by Abolitionists. Our doors continue to be a way to service.

Along with the service men, the widows of those soldiers who gave their lives in this great, tragic war also needed financial assistance and an extra measure of God's grace. One hundred years ago, widows in America were as vulnerable as Ruth and Naomi. In two years, after a long struggle, they would finally gain the right to vote as American citizens. Their livelihood was dependent upon their husbands and/or sons in an economy which did not welcome women in the workforce. Along with their unspeakable loss and grief, these widows needed to make a way where there was no way.

Ruth and Naomi's story is an inspiration to us all; however, it is especially poignant for those among us who have lost husbands and sons. When Ruth gives birth to a son following her marriage to Boaz, the friends of Naomi understand what the meaning of this birth is for her. *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."*

On one level the Book of Ruth is a simple story of genealogy with the surprise ending of a foreign woman, A Moabite, becoming the great-great-grandmother of King David and ancestor to the Christ Child in a lineage which emphasized purity of race. On another level the Book of Ruth is a story of resilience, loyalty and loving-kindness between two widows. Together they

make a way where there is no way. Naomi knows the system which she teaches to Ruth and together they work the system to secure a future.

Make no mistake, Ruth's willingness to approach Boaz on the threshing floor was a bold move which could have ended badly. Without getting into the details or the politics of sexuality in ancient Israel, Ruth was making it very clear to Boaz that she was interested in becoming his wife. There is risk and respect among all the players in this courageous scenario. They give their all to one another, not unlike the widow in Mark's story who gives her all in spite of a religious system that exploits her. Something we are each called to do in the lives we live, in the commitments we make, and in the unexpected losses along the way.

Today, we honor the sons who gave their lives in the great war to secure a future for strangers living in another land and to promote peace and security throughout the world. Today we honor the mothers and wives who lost the men they loved in that war and who persevered in their absence.

Long before the Great War, the red poppy was a symbol of death, renewal and life. Ironically, the poppy is the source of opium, which has provided comfort to fallen soldiers for generations. The seeds of the flower can remain dormant in the earth for years, but will blossom spectacularly when the soil is churned. When the Flanders fields of Northern France became the scene of devastating war, red poppies spontaneously appeared and their beauty inspired physician Lt. Col. John McCrae to write the most famous single poem of the First World War, *In Flanders Fields*.

The poem is written from the point of view of those who have died, the restorers of life who have given their all, and who call the living to carry the torch and to keep the faith. May we honor the lives of those who have come before us in the living of these days. May we become restorers of life and continue the spirit of respect, generosity, and inclusion that has always been a part of this congregation. I echo the challenge of Dr. McFadden spoken from this pulpit one hundred years ago: "What will we give of ourselves?" Amen.