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St. James', Mt. Airy
11/8/2015

Proper 27/B
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:8-44

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

At first glance, today's stories of Naomi & Ruth and the widow who gave all she had to live on, present us with tales of sacrifice.

And if we were thinking of the roots of the word sacrifice – the Latin roots “sacred” and “to make” – which means something of value offered as an act of devotion, then we wouldn't be too far off the mark.

When their husbands died and they were left destitute, Naomi decided to return to her homeland and kin to seek protection. She tried to send her daughter in laws back to their own families, and eventually Orpah ceded to Naomi's pleas. Ruth, however, sacrificed her known world in an act of love and loyalty 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 shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!*¹

¹ Ruth 1:16-17

The widow's two small copper coins, too, can be seen as a sacrifice in this understanding – using what she had to worship God.

But we have to be careful of the valorization of sacrifice. Today the word sacrifice has taken on the meaning of giving up more than we should, and less than we can.² And in particular the idea of self-sacrifice has become a double edged sword with multiple motivations, most of which stray far from the mark of something offered as an act of devotion.

In this light Ruth follows Naomi out of self-interest rather than love and loyalty, and the widow simply becomes the foil to the hypocrisy of the scribes – someone we can conveniently put up on a pedestal without having to engage in our own lives.

Which is why I believe a better way of approaching these women and their stories is through the lens of authentic offering.

Ruth had two things to offer Naomi – hospitality and fidelity – both of which she gave with an open heart.

Hospitality is an ongoing theme in the Book of Ruth. First, when there is a famine, Naomi and her husband and their two sons seek refuge in Moab. This was remarkable because there was great enmity between the Judeans and Moabites, but they were shown hospitality and eventually made a life there; their sons took Moabite women as their wives.

² Emilie M. Townes, Theological Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

At the end of the story hospitality is again shown when Naomi and Ruth return to her kindred in Judah seeking shelter. Seeking security for Ruth, Naomi gives instructions on how to glean and then how to approach Boaz. He responds with a kind of hospitality of his own, assuming the role of next of kin and marrying her.

And that hospitality leads to a baby named Obed, who became the father of Jesse, the father of David. It was from a foreign refugee – what today we might call a migrant – that the greatest king of Israel was descended.

If that weren't enough, right in the middle is the bit of hospitality that rings most true for me. It is when Ruth refuses to leave Naomi and offers hospitality.

What does hospitality look like when you have nothing tangible to give? Ruth offers a deep truth when she offers her continued presence with Naomi – *where you go, I will go*. Together they take shelter in one another, each assuming the roles of guest and host in the safe harbor they create together.³

This hospitality was possible, in part, because of Ruth's steadfast fidelity.

Ruth is so firm in her resolution to follow Naomi that we come to understand that she does not see it as a choice. It is just what one does. It is an act of abiding. And Naomi responds in kind, offering fidelity as well.

These two women are exemplars of *hesed*.

³ Martin B. Copenhaver, Pastoral Perspective, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*.

In Hebrew, the word that describes faithful action – the way in which Naomi tried to secure shelter for her daughter in laws by sending them back to their families, the way Ruth followed Naomi, the way Naomi provided for Ruth by finding her a new husband, and the way in which Ruth continued to love Naomi and make a home with her – all of this is *hesed*, loving kindness wrapped in loyalty.

When authentic offering is made, from one to another, we see that it springs forth from places such as hospitality and fidelity, from *hesed* – from abiding love. This is how we know that God is the source, and not the ways of the world.

This is what Jesus was pointing to in today's Gospel passage.

Jesus did not condemn all scribes, but as he and his friends observed people coming and going in the temple, he entered into teaching.

Beware those who puff themselves up, who expect respect without earning it, who believe they are entitled to only the best. It is they who take more than their share, and act as if their pious words speak louder than their actions.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Take out the word scribe and insert any number of current groups, and we see the same today.

The sacrifice that those in power make is not a sacrifice in any means of the word. It is neither an offering made as an act of devotion, nor is giving up more than they should, and less than they can. Too often what is given is scraps.

There is no heart, intention, or love, in the giving of what we will not miss – because it will always be a giving of stuff, not of ourselves.

This is where the widow comes in. Not as a model of holy self-sacrifice, but as one who makes a bold offering of all that she has and is.

The two copper coins become a symbol of the whole self. Offering in this sense is not so much about the act of giving or receiving as it is the act of being itself.

It is the offer of abiding presence. It is a faithful response to God's abiding presence.

At our best we walk through this world and our lives making offerings, not sacrifices. It is not always easy, and we're not always successful.

It is easy to be swayed by those things that put us in lonely places: greed, power, jealousy, pride, anger – you name it.

But one of the reasons we tell stories, and read scripture, and hold up the lives of saints, is that in doing so we cultivate hope. We give ourselves an antidote to the sin of the world and seek ways to re-center our lives on God. We say, "I can do what Ruth did – I can offer the hospitality of my presence with this friend who needs it." We think, "Today I'm going to try and offer all that I am, taking the risk of vulnerability in the hopes of living wholeheartedly."

~ For this, let us say, Amen. ~