

“Contrasts”
St. Paul’s UCC Church
November 7, 2021

Friends in Christ....

I have a question for you. How many books of the Bible are named for a woman and what are they? (Pause)

There are two – Esther and Ruth. Esther tells the story of a Jewish girl who becomes Queen of Persia and with the help of her Uncle Mordecai saves her fellow Jews from a holocaust and that led to the festival of Purim which is still celebrated today.

The other is Ruth where today’s Old Testament lesson comes from. It is the story of everything from widows, gleaning fields of barley, marriage customs, justice at the gate, sorrows, joy, and the birth of a child of destiny. Ruth is only 4 chapters long. You heard a fine sermon last week on Chapter 1 which introduces us to Naomi and Ruth. Today, we will hear selective verses from Chapters 3 and 4.

Brent Strawn in Working Preacher wrote: “Ruth is also one of the few places in the male-dominated world of Scripture where women play the major roles and are the central characters. They must make their way, of course, amidst the men and the male-dominated world of ancient Israel, but the emphasis is squarely and resolutely on the women. This is a rather remarkable situation and no small gift to us and the canon. Let us now hear our texts from Ruth for today:

Ruth 3:1-5

Encounter at the threshing floor

³ Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, should not I seek security for you, so that things might go well for you? ² Now is not Boaz, whose young women you were with, our relative? Tonight he will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor. ³ You should bathe, put on some perfume, wear nice clothes, and then go down to the threshing floor. Do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, notice the place where he is lying. Then go, uncover his feet, and lie down. And he will tell you what to do.”

⁵ Ruth replied to her, “I will do everything you are telling me.”

Ruth 4:13-17

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife.

He was intimate with her, the LORD let her become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. ¹⁴ The women said to Naomi, “May the LORD be blessed, who today has not left you without a redeemer. May his name be proclaimed in Israel. ¹⁵ He will restore your life and sustain you in your old age. Your daughter-in-law who loves you has given birth to him. She’s better for you than seven sons.” ¹⁶ Naomi took the child and held him to her breast, and she became his guardian. ¹⁷ The neighborhood women gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They called his name Obed (Obed means *one who serves (God)*). Obed became Jesse’s father and David’s grandfather.

Our reading for today has us skip the drama of Ruth 2. Ruth 3 is used for the connection with Boaz and then it zooms ahead to the very end of Ruth 4 for the “happy ending” of the tale

and how it all points forward to King David. On her own initiative, Ruth has secured a food supply for Naomi and herself and, in the process, has made a very promising contact with Boaz, a kinsman of her late father-in-law.

What we most certainly get in the final verses of Ruth is a return to fullness for the previously empty Naomi, who at the end of Ruth 1 made clear that not only was hers and Ruth's life completely empty, Naomi herself was "bitter" at God for all the ways he had afflicted her of late and so re-named herself "Mara" or "Bitter." But as the story ends "Naomi" has gone from empty and bitter "Mara" to being full and wonderful "Pleasant" again (the meaning of "Naomi"). The contrast in attitudes is great that she now has hope.

Here then is a reminder of the peculiar and always surprising grace of God, a truth that was not lost on Matthew when he created his genealogy of the Christ in Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew went out of his way to include four women, not the matriarchs, but outsiders in his family tree of Jesus. You can trust that Yahweh is working behind the scenes. He brings restoration into lives.

The book of Ruth is a reminder that it is important to honor the humanity of every person. There is no need to think too highly or too lowly of others or themselves. This contrast is again pointed out in our Gospel text from Mark 12:38-44, the difference between the legal experts and the poor woman.

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸ As he was teaching, he said, "Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. ³⁹ They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. ⁴⁰ They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly."

A poor widow's contribution

⁴¹ Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. ⁴² One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny {Or *lepta* (the smallest Greek copper coin, each worth 1/128 of a single day's pay), that is, a *kodrantes* (the smallest Roman coin, equal in value to two *lepta*)}. ⁴³ Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. ⁴⁴ All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

May God bless our hearing of His Holy Word? Amen.

Jesus was on his way to the cross. He took his disciples to the Temple to observe what was taking place there. He pointed out to them the attitude of the Legal Experts who were known as Scribes. They were experts in the Law of Moses, and were well respected for their knowledge. However, they were full of themselves. They made every effort to stick out, for example -- by wearing long robes unlike those who worked with their hands. Jesus criticized their praying for being long, loud, and very public. He criticized their behavior towards widows. He criticized how they made their contributions to the Temple.

Chelsey Harmon from the Center for Excellence in Preaching wrote: Like the Scribes screaming “See me!” with their long robes and special public attention, Jesus saw how the Treasury temple offering system was designed to give attention to people who put in the most money. The container was shaped like a trumpet’s bell, so as the coins hit the metal, they clinked and clanked and drew attention. Plus, the larger the offering, the more time it would take for the coins to filter down through the narrowing opening to the chest below... all of this happening in public. The poor widow’s coins were probably silent in comparison to the offerings of the “rich and famous.”

She went on to write: Jesus warns about a number of practices that the scribes have adopted—including devouring widows’ houses. How did they “devour” widows’ resources? Historical evidence suggests a number of ways scribes interacted with (and could take financial advantage of) widows:

- though it was forbidden, many took payment from widows for providing legal assistance;
- while serving as lawyers, some cheated on the wills or mismanaged the widows’ estates;
- some scribes were known to take advantage of, and freeload upon, the hospitality offered to them by widows;
- certain scribes were in the habit of taking payment and promising to make intercessory prayer for widows (i.e., making it a business transaction);
- and if a widow could not pay, there were known cases where scribes literally took the widow’s home as payment for services rendered.

Then a very poor widow came and gave her offering. Jesus pointed out that she gave her all, and did it in a private way. This is not a text on stewardship. It is more of a text on being humble before the Lord, and that our giving should be of a sacrificial nature. That leads to the question of whether or not we are willing to commit acts of sacrifice without being recognized. Yet, aren’t we a people who want recognition which gives a sense of validation. Recognition does not mean fame, but we have a need to receive acknowledgement for things that we do. We all like to be told “good job.” One can respond with a simple “thank you.” Being humble reminds me of a Mac Davis song. Its first verse is:

O Lord, it’s hard to be humble
When you’re perfect in every way
I can’t wait to look in the mirror
‘Cause I get better lookin’ each day
To know me is to love me
I must be a heck of a man
Oh Lord, it’s hard to be humble
But I’m doin’ the best that I can

Think of the contrast between those who are humble and those who are not. Which do you prefer to be around? Which are you? Being humble does not mean that a person does not have courage. Both Esther and Ruth displayed courage and we can find many contemporary examples. We need to remember that God comes first in our lives.

The prophet reminds us in Micah 6:8 -- He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Thanks be to God. Amen.