

**Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**Sunday November 8, 2009**

Proper 27B 2009

In the name of our one, ever creating, ever loving, ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's lessons focus on security, relationships, and God's incredible generosity and surprising ways. The Book of Ruth is often thought of as being about Ruth's love for and loyalty to her mother-in-law Naomi. But it is about more than that – it is about security for the economically and socially vulnerable. Naomi and Ruth are both widows left without sons or anyone else to protect and provide for them. Ruth is not a Jew but a foreigner and Naomi begs her to return to her people where she might get some support. Ruth refuses and accepts Naomi's God as her God.

Today's passage is about courtship, perhaps even seduction. In light of Ruth's precarious situation as a childless widow and a foreigner, Naomi gives her advice on how to get Boaz's romantic interest: let him a good meal and a few drinks and then, when he is asleep, uncover his feet and go lie down next to him and do whatever he asks of you. My goodness, you never know what you'll find in the Bible!

This reading teaches us about relationships and security. The truth is most of us aren't cut out to be lone rangers. Human beings seem to thrive in relationships. We need them. Stable and healthy relationships are essential for our sense of security and identity. Relationships also have their own needs. Relationships are vital growing things that are full of surprises and challenges. They are built on trust, security and stability and, accordingly, require whatever forms of economic security and social stability a society can give them. Stable, secure and trusting relationships benefit all. This why our recent Diocesan Convention voted to support civil recognition of all committed relationships.

I think this story also has a lesson about God's surprising ways. Sometimes, it seems, God's greatest works are the result of God's activity among those who many people think are below God's range of vision. Out of the union of Boaz and Ruth was born a son – who was named Obed and who restored a family and a place in the society to the widowed Naomi through her daughter-in-law. Obed became the father of Jesse of Bethlehem who became the father of David, the shepherd boy who became Israel's greatest king and from whose line came the child Jesus.

I once read about a sermon given by Otis Moss III about God's works on the "B-side". For those under 55, the "B-side" referred to the song on the flip side of a 45rpm record. It was the "filler song" that was on the other side of what was supposed to be the hit song -the one that was being promoted to the disc jockeys. Yet despite the lack of promotion, sometimes the "B-side" became the hit. In a similar way, great King David came from the "B-side" of society – not only from an unimportant family in an unimportant place, but from foreign, non-Jewish descent!

It seems sometimes that God belies the certainties we seem to acquire. God seems to be working everywhere – even on the "B-side" of town and so we never know where God's greatest grace will come from.

Our Gospel lesson has Jesus teaching a similar lesson. Mark's Gospel seems to come alive at times like a movie and this is one of those times. To do a flashback to bring us up to date, Jesus had gone to the temple the previous day and shut it down on one of its busiest days - before Passover - by driving out the merchants and tipping over the money changers' tables! Today, he had just told parables against the temple authorities and provoked them to plot against his life. Now the camera is on Jesus as the audience anticipates things coming to a head. No longer speaking in parables but in clear and pointed terms, Jesus warns the crowds of holiday pilgrims to beware of the scribes, the temple officials, who love the prestige of their office and the deference society gives them, while at the same time stealing from

the poorest of the poor while hypocritically saying long prayers. Does that sound familiar?

The camera might pan the crowd to show the crowd's reaction. Some might be smiling with delight in agreement since the Temple was part of the corrupt system tied to Herod. They were puppets governing Israel for Rome and they taxed the people oppressively to buy their offices. Others in the crowd may be showing great anxiety – wishing to follow their traditional religion and get right with God but also acknowledging their doubts about the way the temple was being run.

The camera now follows the solitary Jesus as he walks into the Temple Courtyard where the trumpet shaped funnels are placed for people's offerings for the maintenance of the temple. Jesus is off to the side, watching intently. Many of the well off put their large offerings in – caching caching caching – the hall echoes -and people turn and look. Now a poor widow walks tentatively up to the trumpet, she reaches into her cloak and put two small copper coins in – ping, if they make any sound at all. No one turns to look. Only Jesus sees and we along with him through the camera's lens.

Now Jesus makes several points with just one sentence: “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 contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.” Jesus is contrasting the widow's faithfulness to the greed and hypocrisy of the scribes. Her action is prophetic – her total faith convicts a system that would rob the poor in the name of God.

Her action is prophetic because it demonstrates that her type of total love of God can yield a different kind of abundance. They wealthy here are giving off the bottom – what is left after they have met all their possible needs. But the widow is giving from the top – her first thought is that all comes from God so God comes first. She is in direct contrast with the rich young man whose attachment to his possessions kept him from following Jesus. That kind of relationship

with God and God's world yields a sense of abundance and security that money cannot provide.

A modern example would be Oseola McCarty. Does anyone remember her? She was an African-American woman who had to leave school and take over her mom's laundry business when she was in the sixth grade. She toiled for 75 years washing other peoples' clothes until arthritis forced her to retire at age 86. Upon retirement she gave \$150,000 – much of her life savings – to the University of Southern Mississippi to fund scholarships for other needy African-Americans so that they could have the education she never had. She told reporters, “I want to help somebody's child go to college. I want it to go to someone who will appreciate it and learn. I wish I could do more. But what I can do, I will do.”

The point isn't the amount of the gift but the faithful relationship that motivates it. The widow had the trusting faith that allowed her to give from the top. Her needs and wants – as great as they were – did not only made even more clear her total dependence on God. Proportional giving – giving from the top – transforms people in ways that surprise them. We meet our needs and re-evaluate our wants. Our priorities seem to change and often we find that we end up with more savings left over after we started giving proportionately than before. More importantly, we find a sense of abundance and thankfulness that is new.

It wasn't the amount that Jesus paid attention to, it was the attitude behind the gift. This was Jesus' last public teaching to the crowds.

Amen.