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Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 12:38-44 | Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17  
November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
The Rev. John Forman

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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, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 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. 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.”

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Well, it’s the beginning of stewardship season again. And preachers often like to take this occasion to present our readings for this morning as examples of people who gave generously. Now, *part* of that impulse is good. The readings from Ruth and Mark *are* about generous people. Ironically, it’s the urge to turn them into examples that leads to mischief.

In our hopes to stimulate generous giving to the church, we can miss the greater implications of these readings. I already trust your pledge generosity, so we can instead hear the deeply human stories of these women as inspirations about what life can be like when we embody the love of God.

The story of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz is a beautiful story about a quality of life called “*hesed*” in Hebrew. The word is notoriously difficult to translate into English. Despite being one of the richest words in Hebrew scripture, there is no single English word that can capture its fullness. Words like “kindness,” “love,” “mercy” and “loyalty” offer fleeting and partial glimpses, and so English speakers find themselves reaching for phrases like “loyal, loving-kindness.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests the phrase “covenant love” as reminder that *hesed* is not love in the form of emotion or passion, but is love expressed as deed. Love that grows and spreads through a dynamic bond of loyal commitment in which people respect each other’s liberty and integrity, yet with their destinies freely joined.

“Those who know it,” Rabbi Sacks says, “experience the world differently from those who do not. It is not for them a threatening and dangerous place. It is one where trust is rewarded precisely because it does not seek reward.”

It is a quality that, by God's grace, can characterize us.

The word “hesed” shows up throughout the Book of Ruth, although our lectionary manages to miss every instance. The quality of “covenant love” is displayed in Ruth’s fidelity to Naomi, Naomi’s loving concern for Ruth and Boaz’s loving-kindness to both women.

Ruth is a Moabite woman whose Jewish husband, Naomi’s son, dies in Moab where the family had gone to escape famine in Bethlehem. When the famine ends and after the death of her two sons and her husband, Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, reluctantly returns to her Moabite family where she might find some security.

Staying in Moab was the sensible choice. Instead, Ruth declares her allegiance to Naomi and to the God of Israel, and the two of them return to Bethlehem. Ruth’s choice is not financially sensible or personally pragmatic. It is a reflex of generosity – an act of covenant love, a freely chosen gift of her entire personhood.

After Orpah has kissed her mother-in-law Naomi goodbye, Naomi turns to Ruth trying to persuade Ruth to go back to her family and the gods of her people. Let me read to you how Ruth responds: “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may Adonai do to me if anything but death parts me from you.”

Covenant love, do you see, is not primarily something that people “feel.” It is something that people do for other people who have no claim on them.

Just so, Mark’s Jesus sees another widow acting much like his ancestor, Ruth. Another widow giving her entire life, but this time, not to a beloved family member. Jesus sees her giving her last resources to a temple that has become corrupt.

Leading up to this story, Mark’s Jesus has been criticizing those temple leaders who have chosen to join the extractive and domineering powers of empire and self-aggrandizement. Scribes, that is, who are a part of the temple structure that collects money from the very people it is supposed to support and protect. These same scribes Jesus describes as self-absorbed and impressed with themselves—those who take the most privileged seats at

banquets and in the synagogue. He has just warned his followers to beware of those who “devour widows’ houses.”

And yet, as Jesus watches one of these destitute widows, he does not see her as a victim of the systemic evil that will likely end her life. He compares her gift favorably to the others without making an example of her, never applauding her self-sacrifice or prompting us to follow in her footsteps. He doesn’t command his followers to rescue her. He also never warns his followers *not* to be like the people putting great sums into the treasury out of their abundance.

He first simply watched – *noticed* – all of these people and brought them to the attention of his followers. Only then did Jesus focus his followers’ awareness on this one woman making an offering of two small coins. Her’s might appear a futile gesture. Keeping her coins may only keep her alive another week and giving them to the temple is unlikely to even be noticed.

So why does Jesus single her out for attention?

Whatever else Jesus wants his followers to realize begins with simply noticing this woman. To see her. To recognize her humanity, her dignity and her intrinsic value as one of God’s beloved children. She is not a character or an example of moral behavior. She may be mostly invisible, but she is always a person worthy of Jesus’ attention.

Once we see her as a unique person and our sister, we are ready to see what she is really offering and why.

The Greek word behind the phrase “all she had to live on” is ambiguous. It can mean “her whole living,” but it can also mean that this widow, at the mercy of unjust scribes in the temple, is nevertheless offering to God, through the temple, “her whole life.”

Four days after this event, Jesus, the descendant of Ruth and Boaz, will give his whole life – everything that he has, everything he has taught, everything he loves – he will give his life in its wholeness to redeem, restore and renew creation. Jesus gave his whole earthly life to show and teach his followers that following him means not just whole-life *giving* but whole-life *living*.

And so, in one way, the widow’s story is nothing new. She lives out her covenant love like Ruth, Naomi and Boaz. And in another way, her story also

makes everything new. She expresses her love for God by giving her whole life, trusting that her action will lead to something beyond herself.

She gives her all not for what it does for her, but because it is *who she is*. She recreates what giving means – what stewardship means – by embodying whole-life hesed in the same Christ-like pattern as Jesus, who will also give his whole life in the face of unjust structures that seek to destroy it.

Covenant love is an act of engagement, a gift of self to self that is learned from the acts of God; a gift of loyalty that inspires loyalty; kindness that enkindles kindness; love that generates love. “More than anything,” Rabbi Sacks says, “hesed humanizes the world.”

God knows no other way than to give God’s whole life. Through the incarnation of Christ, God gives human form to God’s very essence for the purpose of liberating love, setting kindness loose on creation, freeing us from fear so that all of creation can live in wholeness.

God in all faithfulness gives and lives in covenant love with all creation. And so there is an opening for us to ponder in response. What are we willing to give our whole lives to? Not because of what giving does for us, because this is an imperfect world full of disappointments, unfairness and injustices.

What are we willing to live our whole lives for? Not for what we hope to control, because this is a world of imperfect people, gathering in imperfect religious communities, within imperfect social and economic structures.

Each of us must work out what are we willing to give and how are we willing live in wholeness. If we choose, with God’s help, we can pour out God’s covenant love through dynamic bonds of loyal commitment in which we respect each other’s liberty and integrity, yet with our destinies freely joined.

Because that’s what God creates us to do. And how God creates us to live.

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