

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17
Mark 12:41-44

A Widow's Faith
Pastor Dennis Plourde

November 8, 2009

I still vividly recall the scene. It was my first Christmas with a congregation and I was checking on how things were going. As I entered the dining room one of the women took me aside and said, "If you don't get that woman out of here I am going to kill her!" Not exactly what I needed to get me in the Christmas spirit. As I investigated the situation I discovered that the woman who had taken me aside had been asked to do the table decorations for the dinner. She had enlisted a great group and they had done a great job in giving each table a distinct Christmas flair. However, the other woman, the one who had asked her to do the job, was now going from table to table rearranging them to her liking. She had in her mind how they should be decorated and even though she had asked someone else... Now there is not any right way to decorate tables. This was a chance for some people to shine and use their skills. But, for one person there was only one way, hers!

Now some things have to be done a certain way. But not table decorations or faith. To have faith may mean something for you and something altogether different for me and altogether different to the person beside us this morning. We should not get upset when people's faith journeys do not match our own, and yet we often do. "If you had only done it the way I said..." We want people to experience faith our way and that seldom happens.

Our Scripture text this morning has three examples: three women, three widows, and three faith journeys.

We begin with Naomi. She had come to Moab years before with her husband from Judah to escape a famine in the land. It was in Moab they found food and hope. While there her husband dies and her sons marry foreign, Moabite women. Then her sons die and she is left a widow in a foreign land with two foreign daughters-in-law. What is she to do? What is she to do with these two women? She has enough problems of her own without theirs. (An entire sermon could be given on women's rights, etc. under the laws of their day. I hope we would be shocked.) Naomi longs for home. She encourages her daughters-in-law to go home, maybe their families will take them back – but they have gotten rid of them. Why would they take on the burden of a daughter again? One, Orpah, decides to take her chances on going back and maybe finding another husband. Ruth, however, will not return home, she is going to stay with Naomi.

These two women return to Judah, to Bethlehem and there they find a complicated life. Their only hope for survival is for Ruth to glean in the fields (they arrive at the time of the barley harvest) and hope she can glean enough to sustain them through the coming days. God does provide and Ruth gleans in the "right" field and redemption for Naomi is found. However the process has left Naomi bitter. Listen to her words as she returns home and the people question if this is Naomi: *"Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity on me"* (1:20-21). She returns bitter. How can faith reward her like this?

Next we come to Ruth, the other person in Naomi's story who returns to Bethlehem with her. If Naomi has little rights Ruth has less. She is a foreign woman in a foreign country with no inheritance rights, etc. Something in Naomi has caused Ruth to return with her. She is not sure what awaits her in Judah but is confident that it is better than what would await her had she stayed in Moab and gone back to her family. We have recorded her wonderful words 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!" (1:16-17).*

Ruth follows Naomi's instruction and finds redemption through Boaz. She marries and gives birth to Obed; *"he became the father of Jesse, the father of David"* (4:17b) Because of her faith she is a part of the lineage of the Living Christ.

The third widow is the unnamed widow of Mark's Gospel. If we know little about Ruth and Naomi we know even less about this woman. All we do know is that she was a widow, poor and that Jesus observed her giving.

Jesus and the disciples are in the Temple in the Court of the Women. It is here the offerings are given. He has watched people give out of their abundance. Some probably brought musicians along to play to attract attention to themselves as they gave. The disciples are probably impressed by these and their gifts—these are true people of faith. Jesus' attention is drawn to this poor widow. He notes that she places two small copper coins in the offering – what good is a few copper coins, worth less than a penny today. I mean what can you do with a penny? You can't even buy penny candy any longer.

When thinking about a penny I thought about the project of the youth of First Baptist Church, New London, New Hampshire. They were trying to find a way to visualize the 60,000 children living in poverty in their state. They decided to raise a penny for each child in poverty, 60,000 pennies. Within six months they had raised their 60,000 pennies. "Before donating the money to local food pantries, homeless shelters, and other organizations, they raised awareness by taking the pennies to the state house, where they met with the governor and state representatives." They have now challenged the ABC/USA to help them continue to raise funds by gathering at least 14 million pennies by April 2010. One penny for each child in poverty in the United States (this would be a good Lenten Project for us.) As of this morning, according to their website, they have raised 602,511 pennies. They asked that we record our pennies and then give to local food banks or places assisting children in poverty.

The widow places two tiny copper coins in the offering. Jesus chooses to point out her gift over all the others because they have given out of their abundance and she has given all she has. A lesson his disciples need to learn. I want to know what caused her to give everything. What would cause such an outpouring of faith and giving? Her faith has caused her to give all.

As I read these stories I come to the conclusion that faith lived out is messy. There are no directions, no right or wrong ways to live out our faith. We look for blueprints for faith and find none. Each of these women approached faith differently. We know that Ruth and Naomi were eventually rewarded for their faith. But we don't know about the woman in Mark's Gospel. The road was not easy for any of them. Yet, we still want to do A and know that we will get B as a result. There are those who say they have the formula and all we need to do is follow it. They are wrong. Faith does not play out in simple formulas.

Faith seldom plays out the same way twice. Our journey today may not be our journey tomorrow. What happened to me may not happen to you. Faith is messy.

It was by faith that Naomi followed Elimelech from Judah to Moab. There in Moab she lost her husband and her sons. She would return home bitter against the Almighty. It would be years before she would see God's promises fulfilled.

It was by faith Ruth followed Naomi back to Judah from Moab. She had no idea what awaited her there. She had no concept of what her life would be like. She did not know if she would marry again or who it might be. She did not know the answers to these or any other questions and yet she followed in faith.

It was by faith a poor widow gave all she had, two copper coins, to God. Where she found her evening meal we do not know. What happened to her this side of eternity we do not know. What we do know is that by faith she gave all she had.

We are a people called to faith. There are no blueprints or specifications of what it means to be a people of faith. We do not know what the outcome will be this side of eternity. We are just asked to come to the Living God in faith, trusting in a God who has promised to do all things well. Faith is messy—we stand with only the assurance that our God will stand beside us and Our God will provide. How do we know that? We have the testimony of three women -- a widow's faith.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989
NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1989
The Penny Project Brochure, National Ministries, ABC/USA