

## **KINDNESS: IT'S WHAT REALLY MATTERS**

11/11/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 27 (B): Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

It seems to me, that it's when life brings us to our knees that we finally understand what really matters. We receive good news when we thought things could only get worse; we survive a tragic accident; or maybe someone we love dearly dies suddenly. In those moments, we really get it, don't we? We know what really matters in moments like those.

The widows in our readings this morning are examples of this. Naomi, the matriarch in the Old Testament passage is keenly aware that she and her daughter-in-law are in a precarious position. If you remember the story, Naomi, whose husband had died sometime earlier, decides to head back to her homeland after both her sons also die.

Naomi convinces her other daughter-in-law to stay behind, but Ruth insists on accompanying her mother-in-law. In her kindness Ruth proclaims that Naomi will not be alone. Instead she insists, "Where you go, I will go...your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Now it's bad enough that these women lost their beloved husbands, but beyond their grief, the financial repercussions would have been tremendous—especially for women in the historical context of our scriptures; widows in the Ancient Near East were often the poorest of the poor.

In this morning's passage, Naomi and Ruth realize what really matters, and that the simple fact is that they must be willing to be completely vulnerable in order to secure a decent life for themselves. Luckily for them, they encounter a man named Boaz who is not only wealthy, he is kind. In the section missing from our reading, Boaz takes notice of Ruth gathering up the leftovers of his crops. At first he simply makes arrangements for her to continue gleaning without harassment. Later, his actions move past kindness into marriage, but along the way, Ruth and Naomi appreciate fully this kindness being paid to them.

They realize they are at the mercy of those around them. In their precarious socioeconomic situation, where women are essentially treated as property, they don't "belong" to anyone, so their awareness of what really matters is heightened. The woman mentioned in this morning's Gospel reading is in a similar predicament.

None of these women "belong" to anyone. Their families weren't going to take them back in, because their fathers had passed on that liability to the men who married them. And now that their husbands were gone, they had no source of income; no resources; nobody was responsible for providing for them.

These women would have had to rely on the generosity of others in their community to survive, so, in turn, they knew how important it was to give when it was needed—to give of what little they had. Ruth gives of herself to Naomi; Naomi shares her wisdom and gives advice; and the widow gives her last coins, because they understand what it's like to need something. As I thought about them, I remembered this poem which is aptly called, "Kindness":

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.

What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know  
how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness.

How you ride and ride  
thinking the bus will never stop,  
the passengers eating maize and chicken  
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night  
with plans and the simple breath  
that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness  
as the deepest thing inside,  
you must know sorrow  
as the other deepest thing.

You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness  
that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day  
to mail letters and purchase bread,

only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
it is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you every where  
like a shadow or a friend.

This poem was written by a woman named Naomi Shihab Nye—someone who obviously understands the complexities of life...

“Before you know kindness, as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing...then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore.”

The widows in our readings must have felt that way, because in the place where one understands that kindness is the most important thing, one is willing to give all that one has.

We typically refer to the story in Mark as “the Widow’s mite,” and often use her generosity as a way to point toward increased giving in annual pledge campaigns. And while it is a story about giving of one’s treasure...and I am in no way trying to detract from that...as long as we hold her up as only an example of someone who barely has any money, but gives what few pennies she has, then we can avoid making the story our own.

Let’s be honest...except for just a few of us, it’s hard for us to even begin to imagine having absolutely no money; we can barely begin to relate to knowing the kind of hunger any of these widows would know, and so we keep them “out there” as the “other.” That’s why I want to suggest that this bit of scripture is also a message about how it is we bring ourselves to God...how we trust the truth of God’s abundance.

In our gospel reading, the story of the widow comes directly on the heels of several other examples offered up by Mark, in which the disciples are holding on to some human ideas in relation to the kingdom of God. They have asked to be seated at Christ’s left and right hand in the kingdom, and they have shooed away little children from Jesus’ presence. Time after time they demonstrate that they are not yet fully comprehending Jesus’ commitment to reconcile the WHOLE world—not just a chosen few—but reconcile the whole world to God.

So they continue to hold back a part of themselves, which is why just before the story of the widow, Jesus reminds the disciples that the most important commandment is to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength; in other words, to love God with EVERYTHING that we have—not just 10%, not 50%, not 80%, but everything!

Maybe the reason that disciples don’t quite “get it” is because they have yet to experience the “depths of their sorrow”—the very thing Jesus is preparing them for. He’s trying to get them ready for his leaving—to teach them to be as compassionate with others as he has been with them—so he points out that the second most important commandment is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

As you contemplate what it means in your own life to give everything to God—to trust in the truth of God’s abundance—I’ll leave you with a simple quote that arrived in the mail one day six years ago as I was studying these same scriptures. It came with a note from a parishioner offering consolation to me as I mourned the death of my mother. It says, “God will mend your broken heart, if you will give God all the pieces.”

Such a little card with such a HUGE message—huge enough that I saved it all this time. Maybe it’s not your heart that’s broken right now, but I’m willing to bet that there is some part of your life that could be made whole if only you’d give God ALL the pieces. Because when we let God in completely—when we give our whole life over to God—then we experience the knowledge of what really matters as described in the poem, and that is “only kindness”. And kindness, of course, is really God...“only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you every where like a shadow or a friend.”

-AMEN

## The Collect

O God, whose blessed Son came into the world that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us children of God and heirs of eternal life: Grant that, having this hope, we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that, when he comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom; where he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

## Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

## Psalm 127

- 1 Unless the LORD builds the house, \*  
their labor is in vain who build it.
- 2 Unless the LORD watches over the city, \*  
in vain the watchman keeps his vigil.
- 3 It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; \*  
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,  
for he gives to his beloved sleep.
- 4 Children are a heritage from the LORD, \*  
and the fruit of the womb is a gift.

5 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior \*  
are the children of one's youth.

6 Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them! \*  
he shall not be put to shame  
when he contends with his enemies in the gate.

### **Hebrews 9:24-28**

Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

### **Mark 12:38-44**

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."

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

*Come, Holy Spirit. Take our lips, and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire, in the name of the Holy Trinity. Amen.*

Start

-AMEN