

KINSHIP
Randall Tremba
November 8, 2015
32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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

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.

Mark 12:38-44

A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then Jesus called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing large donations 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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Yesterday some of the youth of our church raked leaves. They raked for those in our parish for whom raking leaves and cleaning gutters are difficult, risky or impossible. It's what kinfolk do for kinfolk who need a helping hand.

But these were not aunts, uncles or grandparents. They were kin of a different sort. Whether they knew it or not, the youth were practicing a form of kinship broader than traditional definitions of kinship.

It was more than a nice gesture. It was more than a community service project. It was an act of radical kinship. They were working on something greater than raking. They were working on a certain kind of kinship.

And that in part is what church is, or what a community of faith is, or what I like to call a "household of faith." We are members of one family, one body. We look out for each other and our children in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want.

Most of us have a natural sense of obligation to help the members of our own household or extended family whether we want to or not. I'm not sure my children want to replace batteries in my smoke detectors, clean my gutters, cut and split wood but they do it, in part, to protect their aging father from back injury or falling off a ladder. Or now that they know what it's like to change dirty diapers, maybe they lend us a helping hand out of deep and profound gratitude for all those free diaper changes, or free meals, free rides and the occasional interest-free loans.

Caring for our own kindred is a good beginning but it's not meant to end there. We tend to define kinship narrowly and then build walls against the other, the outsider. But the Beloved calls us beyond self, family, tribe, nation and church into a different kind of kinship.

And that brings us to the Old Testament lesson for today. It's the story of Ruth, an outsider, a migrant who was adopted into an alien tribe.

The ancient Israelites were tribal, as most people were then and are still. If they could have, the Israelites would have built a great wall between themselves and the Moabites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan River. The Moabites, or so they said, were

infidels, filthy, rapists, scary and dangerous. The last thing the Israelites wanted was a bridge from there to here.

And now to the story of Ruth.

Once upon a time, some 1000 years before the birth of Jesus, the land of Israel was stricken by a famine. And thus Naomi, her husband and two sons became refugees in search of food and safety. They crossed the river into Moab. The Moabites welcomed them. Naomi's family survived and thrived.

Against their own tribal taboos, the two sons married Moabite women. It was one happy family and then tragedy struck.

Naomi's husband died and soon thereafter both sons. She was now a childless widow. Do not call me Naomi, she said. Call me Mara. Naomi means pleasant. Mara means bitter. Naomi would return to her native land to live out her bitter years.

She urged her two Moabite daughters-in-law to return to the protection of their own father's house. One did. But the other, Ruth (which means friend), said 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 and 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!"

It was a covenant of friendship, a covenant of a different kind of kinship.

And so, Ruth and Naomi crossed over the Jordan River into Judea, Naomi's tribal land. They were women with no security and no standing—easy prey in more ways than one.

As widows in that time and place with no male protector, they were vulnerable to exploitation and certain poverty. But the tribe had a gracious law of sorts. An unmarried kinsman had an obligation to marry a kinsman's widow, in this case the young widow Ruth. As it turns out, Naomi had such a kinsman, a successful farmer and confirmed bachelor named Boaz, who was not inclined to marry anyone—and certainly NOT a despicable Moabite woman.

Through a series of maneuvers Naomi conspires with Ruth to woo Boaz out of his provincialism, prejudice and fear, you know the way the Spirit conspires to woo us out of our prejudices and fears.

This is a love story. It's a romance but it's way more than that. It's an early effort to redefine kinship more broadly. We are all one. But what does that mean in practice?

To make a short story even shorter, Boaz and Ruth married and gave birth to a son, Obed. Obed would become the grandfather of King David.

And thus was old Naomi restored to joy and community. No longer Mara but Naomi again. Ruth, the outsider and migrant, became part of King David's family tree from which Jesus was born. No wonder Jesus had a deep sympathy for outsiders. And that compassion is part of our own tradition that has Jesus as its heart.

By the way, the word king derives from the word kin. Thus the kingdom of God is now sometimes called the *kin-dom* of God.

In this story Boaz is called the kinsman redeemer—one who brings the forsaken and lifeless back into community, to safety, health and wholeness. A redeemer doesn't take us to heaven; a redeemer brings us back into community—which is, as we know, quite heavenly.

This quaint and ancient story reveals one tribal people's way of protecting the life and dignity of the vulnerable, of those with no standing represented in the story by a widow who in turn stands as an icon for all such vulnerable people in any society in any time.

Which raises the question: *How do we protect and redeem the vulnerable and marginalized in our nation and the world?*

Once upon a time Jesus sat watching the high and mighty make their grandiose donations at the Temple. That Temple in Jerusalem was more than a religious center. It was not the equivalent of a church. It was the monumental center of the whole Jewish nation. It received and redistributed taxes.

Jesus was watching. Jesus knew as most everyone did that many of the rich *cats* had gotten rich by rigging the system in part by exploiting widows, by—in today's terms—foreclosing on their houses and pilfering their savings.

Jesus watched the elite reap praise for their large donations. And then he saw a widow put in her last penny, all she had left to live on, traditionally known as the "widow's mite." That story has inspired many ministers for hundreds of years to extol her sacrifice and to cajole congregations to make similar sacrifices to the church. To which I say: baloney. Shame on them.

I don't see the widow's donation that way at all. I don't hear Jesus sweetly commending her. I hear Jesus angrily condemning a system that has forced such a vulnerable person to an act of desperation. "Here! You've taken the rest you might as well have it all!"

How dare you, how dare we, allow laws, policies and practices to steal from the poor in order that some may live in ease and luxury. Can't we see that she and all like her including refugees and migrants are kin to us?

Yes, we can. And we have.

And that's why we have given thousands of dollars through the Peacemaking offering last month to ease the plight of Syrian refugees. And it's why some of us are exploring ways to resettle a refugee family or two. And it's why the children in this household of faith are assembling school kits this very morning for children in refugee camps.

In a household of faith there's something for every hand to do, young and old. It's our calling from the Beloved. And it's how we practice true communion with God and true kinship with others.