

## ***“Looking Back and Looking Forward”***

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

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

One day Ruth’s mother-in-law Naomi said to her, “My daughter, I must find a home<sup>[a]</sup> for you, where you will be well provided for. <sup>2</sup> Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. <sup>3</sup> Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. <sup>4</sup> When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

<sup>5</sup> “I will do whatever you say,” Ruth answered.

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup> Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin;<sup>[a]</sup> and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup> 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.” <sup>16</sup> Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup> 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 Jesus Denounces the Scribes**

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

### **The Widow’s Offering**

<sup>41</sup> He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup> 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. <sup>44</sup> 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.”

### **Sermon:**

Several years ago while I was living in Louisiana my friends who were the pastors of the Bayou Blue Presbyterian Church invited me to go on Bayou Tour with the Pointe-aux-Chien tribal leaders. Being the kind of person who always says yes to an invitation on a boat - I immediately said yes to this adventure. I also love learning about the rich diversity of Indigenous tribes in North America- so this felt like a win win situation. And... it was a lovely sunny fall day and I got to meet incredibly lovely people. But the tour that afternoon is not something I would have described as lovely. Rather I would describe it as poignant... painful... tough. The reason for the tour is that members of the Point-aux-Chien tribe

wanted people to see what has happened to their land. They needed their fellow humanity to show up and bear witness to their reality. What had once been luscious wetlands with thick vegetation was now just big open water ways full of brackish salt water killing everything in its wake. In a very short amount of time the Pointe-aux-Chien's tribal lands had almost completely disappeared... which is not only their lively hood, but also their homes, their gathering places, and even their sacred tribal burial grounds...almost all of their homeland had disappeared and what is left is now at a higher risk of continued flooding especially during hurricane season. And you might be wondering what happened?!? Why has their land disappeared? ... the answer is oil and gas companies had created oil wells along the Louisiana coast that leaked oil and gas into the surrounding environment and the loss of the land quickly ensued. On the tour they showed us a new well that had just been installed... and year later when I returned for another tour... I saw with my own eyes that the land around that one well had completely disappeared, and we were, now, sitting in a vast waterway.

The members of the Pointe-aux-Chien tribe taught me that how we treat the earth matters... and that it doesn't just matter for the sake of the earth (which we are called to be stewards of)... but it matters because we all live on this earth together- and our experience of life on this planet is a shared experience... what I do affects how you get to live on this planet. Ultimately our home, planet earth, is not limitless.... we live on a planet with finite resources. Which means for some to use more than their fair share means that someone else is left to be at risk and with not enough.

For whatever reason climate change is considered by many to be a political hot button... or potentially a polarizing conversation and yet... today is a Sunday dedicated to Climate in the pulpit.... And I'm wondering if we can quiet the partisan voices from our world... and listen closely to the bible... I wonder how our faith might challenge us to see it differently... Pope Francis states in his cyclical on climate change:

*We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged, and at the same time protecting nature.*

Our first lectionary text today comes from the book of Ruth, which is a short book of the Bible that is full of beauty and intrigue...the last time I preached I took you on a tour of the book of Esther... which is in some ways is similar.... Ruth is the other book in the Bible named after a woman, it also rarely uses the word God... and it is also read in its entirety at Jewish festival every year... Ruth is read at the festival of Shavuot- which commemorates and celebrates the giving of the law to Moses and the people of Israel in the wilderness. Which at first glance, one might wonder why Ruth would be read at the celebration of the giving of the law... but I think the reason it is read... is because it is a story in which two of the main characters, Ruth and Boaz, are in fact living narrative counterparts to God's law and instruction... this story gives you a peak at the transformation that can happen when one follow God's law- To welcome the stranger, to care for the poor, to give abundantly and generously, to see the pain in others and act in ways that restores their dignity and honor. Both Boaz and Ruth are people who honor their Ancestors (those who have come before them) and are also Good Ancestors- making the world and their community a more hospital place to those who come after them.

Like Esther the book of Ruth tells one narrative story and for you to understand what is happening in today's text I have to give you some backstory... The book of Ruth opens with a family – Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and their two sons are forced leave their home in Bethlehem because there is a famine and they are struggling to survive. Eventually they land in Moab which is considered to

be an enemy of Israel. While in Moab Naomi's two sons marry two women from Moab, but tragically Naomi's husband Elimelech, and both of her sons die. The text is not clear on why they pass away, but one can easily assume that their deaths are connected to the famine. Naomi is left as a widow in a foreign land and she decides to return home. Culturally a widow at this time is someone who would have nothing- no protection, no wealth, no way to provide for herself..... Naomie tells both of her daughters in law to return to their mother's home and to leave her- she knows that she is not able to provide for them. One follows her instruction... but the other one, Ruth, refuses. She tells her mother in law- I will not leave you... where you go I will go, where you stay I will stay.. your people will be my people and your God will be my God- it is a remarkable act of loyalty and love... almost unmatched in the Bible. We do not know why Ruth makes this stand... but what we do know is that her act of loyal generous over abundant love towards Naomi and to the memory of her dead husband is a reflection of the sort of love God has for us all.... There is a Hebrew word that describes Ruth's actions.... The word is Heseb- this word is almost impossible to translate into English... but Heseb means loyal, steadfast, generous, abundant, active love. Ruth is an example of Heseb which is also an example to us of the sort of Love God has for each of us... and so the story continues- the two women remarkably make it home to Bethlehem... but they have nothing and are barely able to survive...

They are in need of food and Ruth goes out to glean in the fields- this is in fact a law from the Torah- that land owners were to not harvest the edges of the field so that the poor could glean food for themselves. And Ruth finds herself in the fields of Boaz- who just happens to be a distant relative of Naomi. When Naomi finds out that Ruth found herself in Boaz's field Naomi is delighted! ... which is where our text picks up today... Naomi comes up with a plan...it is the sort of plan that has worked for women before in the Bible... it is a plan of seduction and danger... but as a woman in the ancient world knows.... There are not many options for women to survive that are not dangerous. So Naomi tells Ruth to get dressed up and to go find Boaz after he is, as one translation puts it, "merry with wine." And Ruth says yes to this plan...

But what is remarkable about this story... is that it could all go wrong... Ruth takes on an incredible amount of risk... if she gets caught she could be executed... and going into a strange man's tent in the middle of the night always has the potential to end in pain and misery. But what is remarkable about this story is that Boaz meets Ruth's act of loyalty and love with the same loyalty and Love... in the middle of night when a startled Boaz discovers Ruth... he does not shame her, or ridicule her, or even take her up on her offer. Rather he has a conversation and makes a commitment to honor his duty as her next of Kin- an action that will restore honor to Ruth's late husband- a man Boaz has never met... Ruth and Boaz are married and eventually have a son named Obed- who has a son named Jesse... who has a son named David- who becomes the beloved and most notable king in Israel's history.... And who eventually has a descendant named Jesus...

Boaz is the picture of a person following the law of God... He follows the law to not harvest all of the barley field, he does not take advantage of Ruth... Rather, he inquires about her and makes sure she is provided for... he ultimately follows the Levitical law and marries the widow of his dead relative to honor the relative who has passed away and he gives care and protection to both his new wife and her mother in law. And Ruth is the fulfillment of the Promise given to Abraham ...her act of loyalty and love brings about the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham way back in Genesis: *I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.*-

In contrast to the story of Ruth... we have a very different set of events in the Gospel of Mark. In our Gospel reading Jesus is watching the offering habits of his faith community... and he warns:

*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,<sup>39</sup> and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!<sup>40</sup> They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. (Mark 12:38&9)*

Jesus is warning that the scribes- those who are supposed to know the law best just might not be the folks living the law. Rather, "The Scribes ostentatious desire for praise and respect demonstrates a false piety"- One scholar notes "that it was most likely that these scribes and religious leaders would manage the financial affairs of widows which was supposedly an act of protection but often was a way to make themselves richer."<sup>1</sup> As the story unfolds a widow gives her offering, a small amount... but also an incredibly generous amount because she gave all (100%) of what she had. This text is often lifted up as an example of generosity and good giving habits. Even if what you have to give is small it is still worth it to give. Though in Bible study this week someone said... "but what does that mean that she gave all she had, who is going to take care of her?..." and I think that is a good question. Because, I'm not sure that Jesus is lifting the widow up as an example of good giving but more so pointing out the way in which the religious elite are in Jesus' words "devouring" her and not providing for her.

And this is our gospel call today... I believe that we are called to be Like Ruth and Boaz to offer radical acts of Hesed to our fellow global citizens.... We have an obligation, like Boaz, to recognize and to offer Hesed... to those who have been forced to the margins and who are barely able to survive, we are called to offer care and protection to those who are forced into extremely dangerous situation and are just trying to survive. **Boaz- was wealthy and could have gotten away with not noticing or doing anything for Ruth, Naomi, or her late husband... and yet he does not ignore her...** we are called to honor the legacy of our ancestors and we are called to be a good ancestor to those who come after us.... Which includes working for a world that does not need the poor to give all they have away while the rich take their money for their own profits.

**And so I ask... Who is paying the price for climate change... it is the poor and vulnerable- it is poor and marginalized communities that are being torn apart for pipelines... It is indigenous tribes living along our coastal wetlands whose homelands are disappearing.... It's families in California who homes are being burned year after year.... It is Caribbean islands who are first in line to more frequent and intensifying hurricanes....** Katharine Hayhoe serves as climate ambassador for the World Evangelical Alliance, representing 600 million people around the world and she states:

*"Climate change disproportionately affects the poor, the hungry, and the sick, the very ones the Bible instructs us to care for and love....Climate change amplifies hunger and poverty, increasing risks of resource scarcity that can in turn exacerbate political instability and even create or worsen refugee crises. Those most vulnerable to climate change are the same people who already suffer from malnutrition, food shortages, water scarcity, and disease." (18)*

In light of Jesus Instruction in the Gospel of Mark... it seems that the poor are being forced to give all of their portion of the earth so that it might be devoured by the rich and notable few.

Today is also All Saints Sunday- a Sunday set aside to give glory to God for the ordinary, holy lives of the believers in this and every age. A Sunday to give thanks to members of our community of faith who have died in the past year and a Sunday to pray that we may be counted among the company

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<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreters Study Bible, Commentary on The Gospel of Mark

of the faithful in God's eternal realm. This day reminds us that we are part of one continuing, living communion of saints<sup>2</sup> At first glance one might think that Climate and All Saints have nothing to do with one another- and why try to touch on both in one sermon. But as I have thought and reflected this week I realized that these two topics are intricately connected. As I discussed today in the Children's sermon- I am incredibly grateful for the legacy and love that I received from my grandfather- and I am grateful that he made a way for me to be the pastor that I am today- the world is a better place for me because Don Logan came before me- and I hope to be that for the folks who are following me. I don't want to leave this world a mess- that is dangerous and dying... but rather I want those who follow me to live on a luscious healthy planet whose resources are equally shared among its inhabitants. One of my dearest Friend's recently told me that she has regular panic attacks about climate change and wonders what sort of world her children are going to be forced to live (or being forced to live in now... considering that they have spent the majority of their young lives living through a pandemic). So what do we do about climate change... how can we be faithful to the gospel going forward? I'm a pastor, not a climate scientist... and I know the solutions to Climate Change are vast and will need buy in from many many people around the world. But I think as people of faith...

1. we need to be open to the conversation and not get defensive. For whatever reason when a topic like climate change comes up... folks are quick to point out how other folks or even whole other countries need to step up first... this is not necessarily wrong- but I know when I'm defensive I'm not open to learning or being challenged.... So let us stay open to learning together and not shutting down the topic because it feels too big to do anything about.
2. Let us be open do changing our habits... I know of myself that there are things I can change... I know I can be more aware of my own consumption and waste... and that changing my personal habits will contribute to a healthier planet. so let us be open to learning and changing.
3. When we are confronted, like Boaz, to folks who are barely able to survive in this world, let us be ready to respond... may we follow God's law to welcome the stranger, provide food and hospitality, and change ourselves to restore them to wholeness in our world and community. Let us be people who are ready and willing to bear witness to people's pain and suffering... and may we act on their behalf when we see it.

Let us Pray:

*God, you have created all things. You have given us the gift of this world and the gift of our ancestors... and all that is within our life of faith. You provide for us from your love and you entrust the care of the earth to the human family.*

*Turn us around, O God. Turn us toward directions of care for your earth. Help us to desire the good of all your children and their welfare. May we adopt new practices and ways of using resources so the earth will be cared for through future years. Help us find ways to honor, sustain and protect the earth so all people may share in its resources in health, and safety, and peace.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/christianyear/all-saints-day/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://pres-outlook.org/2021/09/prayer-for-the-climate-change-crisis/>