

Proper 27 Year B: 10 / 11 November 2018

St. James Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Rev. Gary Cyr

“Being righteous, then, is trusting in God’s future promise while living assured of that future regardless of current circumstances”

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

Psalm 146

Hebrews 9: 24-28

Mark 12: 38-44

What does it mean to be righteous? What is righteousness? The word seems to carry both a positive as well as negative connotation as in righteous anger or being self-righteous. Righteous in anger suggests justification in one’s antagonism towards forces of injustice. On the other hand, being self-righteous connotes an egocentric and pompous stature. Both understandings are seemingly correct where the focus of one is outward while the other is inward. Turning to a more biblical sense of righteousness, the understanding begins to carry with it the weight of trusting in God’s future promise; living assured of that future regardless of the plight one faces in the present. Being righteous, then, is trusting in God’s future promise while living assured of that future regardless of current circumstances. The story of Ruth is a prime example which epitomizes the essence of this biblical understanding of where one trusts in God’s future plans even though the present situation appears bleak.

There have been many writings written about the biblical character Ruth and the canonical book by the same name. In truth, we know very little about her and there is much speculation as to whether Ruth is an historical figure or an allegorical creation. Going down the pathway to determine one or the other only leads us astray from the story’s premise. A premise that is very pertinent to our present cultural and social situation. Simply put, the story of Ruth enlarges the conversation of who’s in and who’s out to include expansive possibilities. Now what does all that mean?

Elimelech and Naomi lived in the area of Bethlehem with their two sons when a famine descends upon the land. As any good parent would do when faced with destitution and hunger, they set forth seeking land that will be able to provide sustenance for the family. The irony here is the word Bethlehem means “House of Bread.” The House of Bread can no longer provide that for which it’s named. Thus, they travel to the land of Moab, a land hostile and unfriendly to Judeans. Or so it seemed. Thus, the family became strangers in a foreign land. In other words: immigrants.

However, life is not all bad in Moab. Over the course of time, the family settles into the community, and the sons take wives from among the Moabites. But tragedy strikes and, one by one, all the males in the family dies. Within a patriarchal society, without a husband or male heir, Naomi must fend for herself. Naomi eventually decides to return to her own country and seek out her late husband’s next-of-kin. She entreats her two daughters-in-law to remain in their own lands since they are natives of Moab and have kin there. Only Ruth will continue by Naomi’s side on the perilous journey back to Judea.

Throughout this story, Ruth embodies the consummate outsider who exudes loyalty and trust, and demonstrates integrity – she is the one who keeps promises. As Ruth leaves the land of her ancestors, *she* becomes the resident alien in the land of Judea. Fidelity and hospitality are hallmarks of this story and epitomize who God is in the life of Israel. For God is the faithful one, God is the one who keeps promises, it is God who is loyal to the covenant. The story of Ruth gives expression to who God truly is.

Imagine if the grain belt of North America experienced a severe drought and the fields of plenty go dry and the land becomes barren. Would people not look elsewhere for food and sustenance? Would they not journey to where the land can produce the means of survival? For North Americans that would entail going south towards Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador and other areas of Central and South America that currently supply much of our produce, especially during the winter months since – thanks to globalization – we northerners no longer live and farm according to the seasons. We would immigrate, would we not, just as Elimelech and Naomi immigrated to foreign lands. Just as Ruth does. Immigrants are dependent upon the hospitality of the host which forms the foundational premise of Ruth’s story.

Ruth's narrative personifies the ethos of Torah, particularly that of the Deuteronomist and the Levitical scribe when we hear in Deuteronomy "Cut away therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing them with food and clothing – You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (10.16-19); and in Leviticus "When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God." (19.33-34). The Hebrew word that in English we understand as "stranger" or "foreigner" is translated in Greek as *axenos*, which also means guest and host. One word carrying with it three understandings which intertwine with one another. Rather than be afraid of the stranger, the alien resident, the immigrant – in other words being xenophobic – we are to be their host and treat them as our guests. Righteousness, in *this* biblical understanding, is a willingness to care for the most vulnerable people in our culture, i.e. the orphans, the widows, the resident aliens, the poor, etc. Righteous anger emerges when we culturally fail to live into this biblical, this Christian ideal, of hospitality and welcome to the least among us.

God's wrath, in this instance, is directed towards those who disenfranchise the marginal, the outsider, the outcast, the least among us. God's displeasure is with the pompous publicans who pontificate on how grand they are for their perceived generosity while utterly failing to see that the cost of their self-aggrandizement is borne by the very individuals touted in Deuteronomy and Leviticus as being shown God's preferential option. These publicans and religious elite trust only in themselves, while the poor and least in society who give of their meager resources demonstrate trust in God as the source of all blessings.

One has only to look at the two coins the poor widow puts into the treasury to understand the coins represent faith and belief. The poor widow personifies all who put their trust in God; whose faith and belief is in the One whose promise is to welcome and connect with relational grace the outsider, the outcast, the marginal, the alien resident, the immigrant – to welcome and connect with relational grace all the disenfranchised. Faith and belief are thus

the hallmarks of one's trust in God. Hence, does the story of Ruth truly enlarge the conversation as to who is the "in" group and who is the outsider. Ruth's story gives voice to expansive possibilities of hospitality and fidelity.

Who can we say is Ruth among us? In what ways does my, does your, personal narrative, our own life story, exemplify faith and belief in God? In what ways do I, do you, offer hospitality to the most vulnerable in our society? I pray that I am not like the publican, trusting only in myself, though I know there are times I can be. My prayer is to be more like the poor widow, trusting in God's promise through which we all can participate in God's relational grace. Can we, as did Ruth, exemplify trust in God's promise such that we show fidelity and welcome to the strangers, the resident alien, the immigrant among us? In Christ Jesus, all things are possible. So, I say yes, we can emulate Ruth and be a source of comfort and loyalty to those disenfranchised and disavowed by the powerful in our midst.