

Nov. 8, 2009  
Ruth 2:1-13  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## Gleanings

For the first three weeks of this month we are considering the story of Ruth. Last week the story began with Naomi, her husband and their two sons who were hungry because the crops failed in their homeland of Bethlehem. So they went as immigrants to the land of Moab. After Naomi's husband died, their sons took Moabite wives. When the sons die, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, pledges to stay with her. Now Ruth is the immigrant, a stranger in a foreign land, a foreigner in a strange land. Both she and Naomi are now hungry, which brings us to today's story about gleaning.

Months ago when I planned this sermon series, I had no idea what the news of this week would be. Well, it's turned out to be quite a week. With a nod to theologian Karl Barth, who said that sermons should be written with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, I've picked three news events from this week that I believe have some connection with the story of Ruth. Each of them is a huge topic and my comments won't do them justice in and of themselves. Yet, I've been struck all week by the touchstones they have with issues that we find in the book of Ruth.

- 1) The vote on Tuesday which defeated the Marriage Equality Law.
- 2) The tragedy at Fort Hood Military Base on Wednesday
- 3) The announcement that we reached double digit unemployment in Oct.

First, today's controversies about marriage and the related topic of family. Controversy about marriage, about who should marry whom, and about what constitutes a family are not new concerns. In reality, marriage customs shift over time and families have always come in a variety of configurations. Today, regardless of the vote on Tuesday, families with same gender partners and same gender parents will continue to be among us. As we say in our statement at the top of the bulletin, you are welcome here.

In the book of Ruth, at this point in the story, Naomi and Ruth are a non-traditional family of two women: a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, which is more unusual to us than would have been in their day. They are also a Jew and a Moabite. Ruth and Naomi are not connected by blood. They are not even connected by tribe. They began their relationship by their common connection to Mahlon, who was Naomi's son and Ruth's husband. Now they are bound together by a personal covenant to support one another.

According to Jewish tradition, however, they never should have been connected in the first place. There were prohibitions against Jewish men like Mahlon marrying foreign women like Ruth. I wonder if that's why they didn't get married until his father died. Maybe his father couldn't accept Moabite daughters-in-law.

The Jews and the Moabites, even though they had ancient common ancestry were separated by cultural customs and different religions. They were leery of one another and sometimes there was overt tension and violence between them.

The suspicion that often exists, sometimes overtly and sometimes just below the surface, between people of different races, different cultures, different religions has surfaced again this week in the aftermath of the rampage at Fort Hood. It is a heart rending tragedy. We do not know why Major Hasan did what he did. We do know that all the speculations about his motives in connection to the fact that he is Muslim have raised tensions around the country. Some of our fellow Americans, Muslim brothers and sisters, are frightened that they will experience a backlash of fear and hatred. Let us hold them, along with those who died and those who were wounded in body, mind and spirit in our thoughts and prayers. Needless to say, Ray and I had no idea how poignant today's anthem, *A Dirge for Two Veterans*, would turn out to be this week.

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When Ruth and Naomi arrive back in Bethlehem, Ruth is now the immigrant, the foreign one. Together, these women are living literally on the edges of society - a situation that many women around the world, who find themselves without the economic support of men, know all too well. It's been many years since Naomi left Bethlehem. She apparently has land, but likely someone in the extended family is now using it. Most likely she doesn't have a physical home. Are they sleeping in a field? Do they have a tent made of blankets? It doesn't say. I suspect they could have used a Habitat for Humanity crew.

We know that they are hungry. Thankfully it is the time of the barley harvest. Ruth goes out into the field to glean. Israelite law made provisions for the poor - the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner - to glean, to collect grain out of the fields after the reapers had finished their work. Land owners were not to pick their fields clean, but were to leave something for those in need.

So what are our modern day corollaries to gleaning? How do we provide for the needs of those who are hungry and maybe homeless? We have federally funded programs to help, but they take time to apply for. One of the obvious ways the hungry, especially the homeless, obtain food for themselves is by dumpster-diving. They rummage through dumpsters, especially near restaurants and stores, to collect the food that people have literally left behind.

Thankfully in recent years more stores and restaurants have made connections with soup kitchens and food banks to transfer leftover food in a clean and safe manner, and into a warm setting, where people who are hungry may come for food.

With the recent announcement about double digit unemployment in our country you won't be surprised to hear that Mid Coast Hunger Prevention here in Brunswick is seeing on average 32 new families a month. These are people who have not sought assistance in the past, but are presently unable to make ends meet.

Mid Coast Hunger Prevention, which is located on Union Street behind Hannafords, is a local organization founded by the churches in this area to work cooperatively to provide gleanings for those who find that their life circumstances – loss of a job, death of a spouse, illness, overwhelming medical bills, - have left them hungry.

Next Sunday we will be taking a Thanksgiving Offering to support the work of Mid Coast Hunger Prevention. We will also be collecting food for their thanksgiving baskets. There is a list in the bulletin of the items they are requesting. Recently our youth group had a bake sale and donated the proceeds of \$223 to Mid Coast Hunger Prevention. They did so because they know that for every \$1 that MCHP receives they can purchase \$12 worth of food from the Good Shepherd Food Bank in Lewiston. So the money you all gave at the bake sale generated about \$2,800 worth of food at Mid Coast Hunger Prevention. I invite us all to give generously to the Thanksgiving Offering, just as today's story says that Boaz gave generously to Ruth.

The story says "As it happened", or "as luck would have it", the field Ruth goes to for gleaning belongs to Boaz, who is a prominent man connected to Naomi's husband's family. He graciously welcomes Ruth, encouraging her to stay close to his young women, telling the young men not to bother her, and offering her extra food and drink. Ruth is shocked. Why would he notice one who should not be noticed, a "foreigner?" When she asks Boaz why he is being so generous, he replies that he has heard of her loyalty and kindness to Naomi.

Kindness begets kindness. In the midst of all the world's tragedies and struggles, one of the answers is kindness.

-like Ruth's loyal kindness to Naomi, who felt all alone in the world.

-like the kind words of support some have offered to those most affected by the marriage decision

-like those at Ford Hood who responded in fierce kindness by knocking others to the floor in protection, by bandaging fallen comrades and dragging them to safety.

-like 76 year old Joan Gaudet of Bradley, ME, and others of the Maine Troop Greeters group who go to Bangor Airport all times of day and night to greet soldiers headed for or returning from Iraq and Afghanistan

-like those who go week in and week out to Mid Coast Hunger and with compassion serve meals and do the dishes.

-like those who build Habitat Houses

- like the generous kindness Boaz offers to Ruth and thus also to Naomi.

*Amelia Earhart once said, No kind action ever stops with itself. One kind action leads to another. Good example is followed. A single act of kindness throws out roots in all directions, and the roots spring up and make new trees. The greatest work that kindness does to others is that it makes them kind themselves.*

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and Jewish philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said, *When I was young, I used to admire intelligent people; as I grow older, I admire kind people.*

Sometimes we underrate acts of kindness as gleanings that are too small, too insignificant in the midst of a struggling world. But gleanings of all kinds feed our hungry bodies and our hungry souls.