

## **Weekly Reading – Monday, November 2, 2009**

We're looking this week at the lessons for Sunday, November 8, 2009, which is the Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time or Proper 27.

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

In this week's reading, the second from Ruth, things get threshed out on the threshing floor! Naomi instructs Ruth, who has been working for Boaz, to make advances. Boaz is receptive. There are matters to be sorted out, in relation to another relative who has prior next-of-kin rights and responsibilities. But that is taken care of, Boaz weds Ruth, who conceives Obed, father of Jesse, father of David, and thus the widow from Moab becomes ancestor of Jesus. There is in the book of Ruth a marvelous holding of the tension between divine plan and purpose and human initiative and risk-taking. In Scripture it's not an either/ or but a both/ and. Naomi and Ruth are gutsy women who in a sense take matters into their own hands. And yet, there is an equal sense of a divine plan unfolding. Don't lose sight of the fact that Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabitess, who becomes grandmother of King David. Not only is she a foreigner but a widow. So this is a story of amazing grace, of God's capacity to do what we could not have imagined or foreseen. God's great project is not about purity of human lineage or having the right genealogy or any other human claim. It's about God and God's grace.

### **I Kings 17: 8 - 16**

The typological Old Testament choice also features a widow who is a foreigner. She is about to prepare a last supper for herself and her son when the prophet Elijah pulls up and instructs her to feed him. God, says Elijah, will make a way out of no-way. Again, the notable thing here is that the person through whom God chooses to work is not of the "right" group, ethnicity, or social status. Apparently God sometimes finds it easier to work with those who aren't too full of themselves or who have a great resume! God blesses and works through the humble, through those who know their need of God. "Help of the helpless O abide with me." In Luke 4, and his inaugural sermon, Jesus will raise the ire of the Nazareth crowd when he cites this story of God's capacity to work through a foreigner, apparently a way of saying to the Israelites that God is having a tough time working through you 'll.

### **Hebrews 10: 11 - 14, (15 - 18), 19 - 25**

The Barthian distinction between faith and religion comes to mind as we hear the continuing contrast between human religiosity (v. 19 "And every priest stands day after day at his service offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.") The point is human activity that must be done over and over to win God's favor or to show that we are on God's good side. The author says, in effect, "Stop it! Stop it right now! In Christ God has shown God's favor and taken your side once and for all. Trust this and live!" Note that while the priests stand at their never-ending work, Christ has "sat down" at the right hand of God. Work is over and done . . . almost. He has sat down, but he hasn't put his feet up. The decisive engagement has occurred at the cross, but there is yet work to be done. But it, and this is the important thing, is work done in the confidence and boldness of Christ's

saving action, not work undertaken to somehow gain God's love or favor. The juxtaposition of faith and ethics in the final verses is just right. "Let us hold fast to our confession without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Salvation is all about grace; ethics is all about gratitude. The "provoke one another" reminds us how much we depend on the example and encouragement of others. Churches can create cultures of risk, service and generosity. Or they can create cultures of fear and self aggrandizement.

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

Just so (see closing note above) Jesus gives his disciples, and us, negative and positive examples when it comes to trust and generosity. And, as is often the case, things are not as they appear to be. Those who are publically noticed and celebrated (and who celebrate themselves) are in reality self-serving and not to be emulated; while those the world does not notice or see are the true exemplars and embodiment of faith. The widow who gave all that she had is another of the "little people," who frequent Mark's narrative and who embody faith. Before this woman we have had the Gentile woman who begs for the crumbs, the synagogue leader who seeks Jesus' help for his daughter, the woman with the bleeding condition and many more. All have in common a wild and self-forgetful trust in God's power and mercy. Many churches are in the midst of stewardship season just now. The temptation for preachers is to say, "We should be like the widow and give our all." One can go that route but I'm not sure it's persuasive or really what the text is saying. Given the Jerusalem and last days context, the first message may be that Jesus gives his all for our redemption. Receiving this great gift, let us respond in trust and joy. We might also consider the ways in which the actions of others inspire us (the widow) or deceive us (the scribes). Somewhere in here is a message about discernment, sorting out true from false, empty from authentic, and that things are not always (seldom?) what they seem to be in a fallen world under the power of Sin. In such a world we need cross-shaped vision correction.