

Adventurous Devotion
24th Sunday After Pentecost
Stewardship Sunday
November 11, 2012
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Ruth 3.1-5; 4.13-17
Psalm 127
Hebrews 9.24-28
Mark 12.38-44

How relieved are you that the presidential election is over? I'm not asking how happy you are with the outcome! Only commiserating over how exhausting the endless campaign ads and opinion polls had become in the weeks leading up to Nov. 6th. I actually tried in those last days and weeks to avoid as much of the endless hand wringing and speculation as I could.

I've found myself drawn to another kind of coverage in these last weeks—that is the stories coming out of the East coast after the hurricane/Nor'easter storm combination moved through some of my old stomping grounds. I was concerned about my sister and friends who all live out there, but that isn't what has drawn me to follow the recovery efforts there. Thankfully they were all ok. What has been so remarkable to hear about is the outpouring of community engagement, neighborly concern, plain and simple human kindness. That shouldn't be remarkable—but in our isolated, self-interested times—remarkable is the only word for it. I loved the picture someone shared on Facebook of a resident in the upper west side of Manhattan who hung a power strip out of their window with a note—we have power—charge your phones here.

Each day some new post from Rev. Ann Kansfield shared how their small congregation in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, was engaged in some new effort to get food and supplies to people desperate and in need. I think it was less than a day after Sandy devastated the area that their congregation of 100 or less gathered supplies and 30 volunteers to make 400 lunches for some frail elderly people staying in a shelter after the storm. I was reading posts like this from dozens of clergy friends on the east coast as their congregations stepped out into the disaster and on often small and sometimes grand scales offered kindness, and food, and hope.

I came to the texts for today thinking about what makes such generosity possible and found two stories that speak to that very question. The story of Naomi begins with a similar kind of devastation. Not a storm but a famine drives Naomi and her husband and two sons to leave Bethlehem and seek sustenance in Moab. The boys grew and married two women,

Ruth and Orpah, but by a tragic turn of events all three women lose their husbands. Naomi decides to go back to Bethlehem when she hears that the famine is over. Ruth and Orpah (her daughters-in-law) decide to go with her. It's a foolish offer and Naomi tells them so. They will never find security or happiness following their aging mother-in-law to a foreign land. They fulfilled any obligation they had to her and she releases them to go home to their families and start their life over again. Orpah relents and leaves but Ruth refuses to be put off.

What makes it possible for Ruth to give up the safety and security of home to make such a dangerous and risky decision? What makes it possible for the widow that Jesus observed at the synagogue to give her very last coins to the service of God? These were not wise decisions. I can just hear Ruth's family grilling her: "Have you thought about this, Ruth? Do you really think you will be accepted as an immigrant in Judah? Do you really think you have any hope of finding a husband and having children... do you think you will survive into your old age without that kind of security?" The widow from Jesus' teaching is no different. When you've only got two coins left to your name, you better do something with them to put some food on your table. She was a fool to give those coins away. No one watching would think either of them to be wise... passionate, maybe, but not wise.

So what made them do it? I don't believe it was a desire to impress anyone. The widow was discreet, nothing like the scribes who made a big show giving long-winded prayers. That was not her game. I don't think Ruth followed Naomi out of some sense of duty or obligation, either. It wasn't because anyone expected her to go. In fact quite the contrary **NOBODY** expected her to go. There wasn't some kind of pressure on her. What made it possible? We don't know why but clearly Ruth made a profound attachment to this woman she had come to love. The words she spoke that day they left Moab have been read and recited at weddings for centuries. It is some of the most beautiful declarations of love we find in scripture: "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—there will I be buried." Duty and obligation... they may come into play over time when you love someone but that is not what is in your heart when you stand and declare your love.

Deep, profound devotion: That's what can make possible such extravagant generosity. That's what we are invited to consider today: the difference between duty and devotion. What would your friendships be like if you sought ways to express your devotion to each other? It's one thing to do your duty to your parents, for your family, and at your job? What would it look like and feel like to go past duty toward devotion? And I'm not

talking about quantity. I'm not suggesting that you add ten more hours of work to the fifty or sixty you already give at the office. I'm talking about *how* we engage our work and relationships—the kind of energy and creativity and joy and fun we create.

When you look at both Ruth and the widow today, the real center of their sacrifice is when they give up their sense of security and walk into the unknown, trusting that God would provide for their future. When I say “giving up their *sense* of security” I mean that they give up the most obvious resource that could create some security for their future. The truth is that none of us can generate security for ourselves. All the preparations we make can create a sense of security. No matter what our station in life and no matter what resources we have at our disposal, we all know that life is fragile and precarious and can change in a moment.

So isn't security itself that Ruth or the widow give up. What they give up is the most likely avenue they have for self-sufficiency. Ruth had a much better chance of remarriage and family if she stayed in her homeland. Going with Naomi meant that she was walking into completely unknown territory. The widow wouldn't have lived long on those two coins in her possession but she would at least know as she left the temple what she could expect from the resources that she had. I don't see either of them as self-destructive martyrs. I see them as adventurers, willing to place more trust in the core relationships of their life than in the security of convention.

We don't see how that trust plays out in this story of the widow. We do in the story of Ruth. It is interesting to take note, that Naomi and Ruth utilize every possibility and leverage every resource they can find to create some security for themselves. Trusting God doesn't mean being passive or closing your eyes and praying for some magic to come and save you. They do everything from gleaning in the fields to exercising the ancient rules that underlie this story of why Boaz has any responsibility for Ruth and Naomi.

It's a rather complicated set of rules and as it turns out there is another kinsman with even closer connection to Ruth and Naomi who could have been called upon to take care of them. Boaz actually intercedes and gets this man to step aside. The reason for his kindness and interest in Ruth? In chapter 2.11 Boaz says to Ruth: “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people you did not know before.”

His kindness and generosity was inspired by her adventurous devotion. And through that interweaving of inspiration and generosity not only did

two widows find security for their old age but a whole nation was led out of a season of conflict and insecurity into a golden age: the child that was born to Ruth was named Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Which brings me back to the stories coming out of the east coast these last weeks: when communities of people pull together, when one act of courage inspires another person's generosity, when meager resources are shared and multiplied—people find hope and help and healing even in the most dire of circumstances.

As we come to this stewardship Sunday, as we consider the many gifts God has entrusted to our care, these stories speak to us: God does not desire our grudging sense of duty. God is not impressed when we play the role of the martyr. But when you do step out in faith and give yourself in some adventurous devotion—you never know what part you may play. You never know how many degrees of separation you are from some magnificent movement of God's grace.

And that's an adventure worth giving your life to.