

Ruth 1:1-19a  
Psalm 113  
21 Timothy 2:3-15  
LUKE 17:11-19

Sermon – October 14, 2007

THANKSGIVING – that’s the great theme of today’s Scriptures – unexpected thanksgivings by people who appear initially not to be the likeliest candidates for joyful gratitude.

Like Naomi in the Old Testament readings: if anyone ever had a reason to be depressed...to ask God “Why me?”...and even to be resistant to anyone caring about her, it would have been Naomi. First, she had to leave her homeland of Israel with her husband and two sons because of a famine – and they had to take refuge in *Moab* already a traditional enemy of their people, a country located in what is now Jordan.

While there, her husband died, then her two sons both married pagan, Moabite wives – a bitter pill for her to swallow – and then both of her sons died. Widowed and bereft of both of her children, and with no grandchildren, Naomi was devastated, inconsolable and felt as if God has punished her – an understandable reaction when one is hit by such overwhelming losses, but not a reaction the Bible endorses.

Can you imagine a less likely prospect for joyful thanksgiving than Naomi?

And can you imagine a less likely person to transform Naomi’s life than one of her *shiksa* daughters-in-law! Naomi formally released both of them from any further duty towards her as she prepared to go back to Israel now that the famine has ended, but Ruth refused to go away, no matter how firm Naomi is.

Astonishingly, Ruth uttered this awesome pledge of fidelity: “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! 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. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

Ruth did not merely tag along; she *converted to Judaism* – something she *hadn’t* done while married to an Israelite – and left her own homeland, family and faith for a journey to a foreign country she had never been to which wasn’t always, shall we say, kind to immigrants, teaming up with a destitute woman whose prospects looked dim at best.

We talked about *faith* last week. This, folks, is *faith*.

And Ruth's was a faith which moved mountains, starting with Naomi's grudging acquiescence. "Oh, well, if you want to hang out with a loser like me, I suppose I can't stop you."

So they walked slowly back to Naomi's home village, and managed to eke out a meager existence as gleaners – poor people who were allowed to go through the fields of farmers after the professionals had finished harvesting and collect whatever they missed. Ah, but Naomi belonged to a culture which values *extended families* and Ruth caught the eye of one of Naomi's relatives named Boaz, who eventually married her. They had a son named Obed, and near the end of the Book of Ruth we are granted the enormously poignant picture of Naomi, surrounded by new friends who praise her and praise Ruth for her love, while Naomi cuddles her honorary *grandson*. Talk about unexpected delight and thanksgiving!

But *even that* is not the end of the story. For Naomi's home town was *Bethlehem*. And, the narrator, in a quietly understated way, concludes by saying that Boaz was the father "of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of **David**."

David – the greatest King of Israel – had a great-grandmother who was an immigrant and a convert. *David*. How different history would have been if Ruth had not made her astonishing leap of faith!

But even the end of the Book of Ruth is not the end of the story. For David had a many-times-great grandson named Joseph, a carpenter, who also was from Bethlehem, where he was with his wife Mary for the birth of her son, **Jesus**.

Even Ruth in her wildest dreams could not have imagined how many people would have much reason to give thanks because of her act of faith and love.

*God only knows how much difference our acts of faith and love will ultimately make.* All God asks is that we *make them* and God will take care of the ultimate consequences. So let us give thanks not only for what we see as a result of the good we may do, but for what we don't see and even can't see as people "pay it forward."

Which leads us to the story of the ten lepers. Leprosy was a loathsome skin disease which left people ostracized by society – and specifically banned from public worship until and unless a leper's healing was certified by a priest. Which I don't think ever happened until...Jesus.

This is why, when the lepers appeal to him for mercy, he simply says, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." For them to start walking *before* they were healed demonstrated their faith that they *would be* healed. Which they were – miraculously healed *and* as a result restored to society, to normal life, including worship, jobs, family, homes, villages, everything.

But only *one* of the ten came back to Jesus to give thanks. Imagine that.

These Scriptures inspire us – and comfort us. What kind of people are each of us? Are we extravagant and daring in our faith and in our love, like Ruth? Could one or all of us be a blessing to generations of people like she was and is? Or do we at least remember to say “thank you” in concrete, meaningful ways to God – going out of our way, like the Samaritan leper?

Or do we risk being like “the other nine” lepers, who, so to speak, “took God’s check to the bank, cashed it, spent it, and never even bothered to write a thank you note?”

How do we say “thank you” to God? For we have received blessings from God – our very lives, our abilities, gifts, skills, loving and friendly relationships, this good earth and all its wondrous abundance in which to live and care for, including a marvelous array of creatures great and small, forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ, a personal “life coach” in the Holy Spirit – I could go on and on. And all these apply to *everyone*, regardless of circumstances, and each of us has *unique* blessings as well.

Thanksgiving is not just a day, it’s an attitude, a way of life, an attitude of gratitude for “The abundant life” (see John 10:10) which Jesus offers us.

Now, if you are enduring suffering as Naomi was, you may not feel like you are experiencing blessings or an abundant life. If so, just let us pray for you and do what we can to love you. Someone may turn out, with God’s help, to be an unexpected blessing to you in time.

If you feel like you have your ups and downs – that you’re normal, in other words – please go home today and write down a list of thanksgivings – *people* for whom you are thankful, things that you can *do* or *experiences* you have had, are having or expect to have for which you are thankful, spiritual, physical, relational blessings – whatever. If you can hear me or read my words, give thanks for your ears and eyes – and for the teachers who taught you to read. If you’re well enough to be in this building to worship God today, give thanks for that – and for your self-respect and self-care, and for the health professionals who help care for you.

I could go on. All I suggest is that you get a BIG piece of paper on which to write your thanksgivings. Then, put it up on the refrigerator for a week and add to it whenever you think of something or someone for whom to be thankful. I’m going to include the names of a lot of the teachers I’ve had. And in preparation for my report to the parish next week on this year’s Kenya Healing Mission Trip, I want to give thanks for Miss Thompson, my 5<sup>th</sup> Grade teacher, who among other things taught us *African History*. This was at a time when most Americans didn’t think Africa *had* any history before the slave-trading Europeans came. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> Grade, a lot of African colonies were becoming independent; Miss Thompson taught us that they were becoming independent *again*.

So reach back – think of all the people you are thankful for, and give thanks to God for them. And then, ask yourself this question: *How can you be like Ruth for someone else?* How can you be a blessing for someone who really needs a blessing – someone you may not ever know?

There are many ways, and I don't want to limit the reach of your mission activities, but one way you can be a blessing to others is through this congregation. One way of many ways you can give thanks to God is through what you do as part of this congregation.

Everyone who prays in this church and everyone who pledges in this church has a piece of all of the life-affirming, life-changing, loving work that we do. And the more people pray and the more people give of their time and talent and yes, the more people pledge, the more we can do together to spread blessings down the street and around the world.

In the weeks to come, everyone will be invited to commit themselves in these areas of time, talent and money. All of us together can do more than any of us can do individually. All of us together can give thanks to God for our blessings by “being Ruth” to the Naomis of this world. All of us together can reach people none of us individually would have been able to reach.

God only knows how much difference we will ultimately make by what we do, but I learned something when Elda and I were on vacation in California. There is a certain seed which weighs 1/100,000 of a pound: tiny, even smaller than the mustard seed Jesus spoke of. That is the size of the seed of a California *redwood* which grows hundreds of feet tall and lives for hundreds of years.

If God can do that with such a small seed, let's not have anyone say that their potential commitment isn't important. God can make things happen if we give of ourselves in faith with thanksgiving. ***Be that seed!***

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