

Comments **Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost** **November 8, 2009**

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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

NRSV

Elimelech has taken his wife, Naomi, and their two sons to live in Moab during a famine (1:1). The sons have married local girls, Ruth being one of them (1:4). Elimelech and both sons have died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law destitute, for an ancient patriarchal society did little for widows. The famine being over, Naomi has decided to return to Judah and has freed Ruth of any obligations to the family, but Ruth has elected to accompany Naomi – and to make the LORD her god (1:16). In Judah, it is harvest time. The reapers are required to leave some grain for the poor (including widows) to glean; Ruth chooses to glean in Boaz's field (2:3). (Boaz is Naomi's *kinsman*, 2:20, so he has some obligation to look after her and Ruth.) Boaz notices Ruth and favours her; he has learnt of her fidelity to Naomi. Naomi sees Boaz' kindness as a gift from God.

Now Naomi instructs Ruth on how to make Boaz her husband. Grain was separated from chaff, winnowed, on the "threshing floor" (3:2); the wind carried the chaff away. The farmer and the workers slept there to guard against theft. Ruth is to wash, put on her "best clothes" (3:3) and perfume ("anoint"), and when Boaz goes to sleep, "uncover his feet" (3:4, probably: make herself sexually available to him). This she does (3:6-7). He awakes at midnight, and finds her beside him. He again treats her with kindness, and assures her that he will "do for you all that you ask" (3:11), if need be. He does not take advantage of her. She leaves before daybreak so Boaz's men will not know she has been there.

In the morning, Boaz goes to the meeting place ("gate", 4:1) where he meets a closer *kinsman*, who has an obligation to buy the land Elimelech has left to Naomi (to keep it in the family). Before witnesses, the man initially agrees to buy it, but when Boaz tells him that protecting Ruth is part of the deal, he backs out. (The land will pass to Ruth's sons, thus he would pay for land he would later lose, 4:5.) The way is now clear for Boaz to marry Ruth (4:13), which he does. God gives her a son. The women of the town tell Naomi that God has blessed her: she now has a grandson (4:14-15). Elimelech's line continues, and Obed becomes grandfather of David (4:17), and here is the point of the story: David had foreign blood, so marrying foreigners is acceptable. (In Matthew 1:5 and Luke 3:31-32, Obed is listed as an ancestor of Jesus.) People of all nations have a place in God's family.

Psalm 127

NRSV

This psalm is made up of two wise sayings (vv. 1-2 and 3-5). The first says that human activity is futile without God's active involvement. ("House", v. 1, means Temple, royal palace, dynasty, as well as house.) V. 1b is an example: a guard on

the city wall watches "in vain" unless God protects the city. Genesis 3:17-19 tells us that humankind was committed to a life of toil for "bread" (v. 2) for disobeying God; this verse contrasts this with God's gifts to those he loves. All kinds of houses have "sons" (v. 3); they are a gift from God; they protect and support their father in time of need: for example (v. 5b), when others try to make him back down in court ("the gate"). ("Arrows", v. 4, are a symbol of protection.)

Hebrews 9:24-28

NRSV

The author continues to see Christ as the great high priest, and to contrast him with a high priest in the Temple. Heaven is the perfect, ideal "sanctuary" (9:24), while the Holy of Holies is a "mere copy" of the divine one. Christ did not enter the Holy of Holies but rather "heaven itself" to "make intercession" (7:25) for us "in the presence of God" (9:24). Unlike the Temple high priest who entered the sanctuary annually to offer animal blood for the redemption of certain sins of the people, Christ sacrificed himself "once for all" (9:26), for all people, permanently abolishing sin – when release from sin previously only lasted a year. He came "at the end of the age" of the first covenant, of the pre-Christian era. God has appointed that humans "die once" (9:27) and later be judged (at the end of the current era); likewise Christ sacrificed himself once and will later return. But his second coming will be to complete and finalize the salvation of his followers. By taking our sin on himself, he has already taken it away.

Mark 12:38-44

NRSV

A scribe has asked Jesus: *which is the greatest precept in the law?* His agreement that to love God and to love one's neighbour are the most important has led Jesus to tell him that he is almost ready for the kingdom of God.

Now, as Jesus teaches in the synagogue, he warns of certain scribes (professional interpreters of the Law) who "walk around" ostentatiously, seek honour in public places ("marketplaces") and seek prestige "in ... synagogues" (v. 39) and "at banquets". ("Long robes", v. 38, may be prayer shawls, normally worn only when praying. The "best seats", v. 39, in the synagogue were near the Ark – where the scrolls were kept – and faced the congregation; the "places of honour" were couches at the host's table.)

Certain scribes, as legal trustees of a widow's estate, charged exorbitantly for their services. The fee was usually a part of the estate, but some took the "widows' houses" (v. 40). Some kept up an appearance of piety. They will be judged harshly in the greatest court of all on Judgement Day. Jesus' disciples are not to be like them.

On the other hand, a "poor widow" (v. 42) is an example of good discipleship. Jesus is "opposite the treasury" (v. 41), possibly in the outer court of the Temple, where people placed their offerings in chests. The "poor widow" – widows were often poor – makes a real sacrifice in giving two *leptas*, the lowest value coin in circulation; she "has put in more than all those" (v. 43) rich people who only give what they do not need.