

Proper 27 (32) Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost November 7, 2021 <i>ART --PRAYER</i>	Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 Psalm 127	1 Kings 17:8-16 Psalm 146	Hebrews 9:24-28	Mark 12:38-44
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Holy God,
 There was Eden, and then there was east of Eden;
 Which is all to say—this world is not what you intended it to be.
 You planted a garden and dreamed of Sabbath—and it was good.
 It was so very good.
 However, when we look around today, we know that we have lost our way.
 So today we bring our hearts, minds, and money back to you in hopes that you will sow good.
 This is the work of restoration, for we want to be a restoration people.
 Use these gifts for your hurting world.
 Restore us to you, oh God.
 Amen.

Today as I record this video, it's important to note our context. That context being that we are in a new phase of the pandemic—unclear of the varying reports about the Delta variant of COVID-19, unclear if we are returning back to previous measures. As I wrote this sermon, parents are worried about kids, clergy are wondering how to plan for the fall, and wrestling with an ongoing conversation about vaccines.

Today, we are also in a place of holding grief from the past few years. Asking, as the writers of *Crisis and Care: Meditations on Faith and Philanthropy* note, “What do we carry with us? What do we leave behind.”

The weekend of Thanksgiving, I was exposed to COVID. I was ill and stayed in bed till February and late March diagnosed as a long hauler. During that time I, like so many, asked questions of my mortality—questions of meaning, questions of what I hoped for in my children’s lives, and the lives of those I touch.

As I was meaning making, I confess I was struck by one specific author in *Crisis and Care*, Aimee Laramore, who talked about how we are often quick to talk about the 3 t’s: time, treasure, talent, but that we leave out the 4th, testimony. The power to testify to the ways God shows up again, and again and again—pushing back on systems of power and turning our narratives. We read throughout the scriptures that the God of the Old and New Testament is deeply concerned about economics. About money and power, about ensuring no one is left behind.

It is this God that shows up In Ruth where we read today:

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

3:1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.

3:2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.

3:3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

3:4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do."

3:5 She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

4:13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son.

4:14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel!

4:15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

4:16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.

4:17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Here we have a story of economics. A story of a person with means and a person without security. Naomi, mother-in law to Ruth, catalyzes the story by naming her desire for Ruth to find security.

Notably, the word for security here is translated as "a safe or restful place." (*Ruth and Esther* by Tod Linafelt and Timothy K Beal).

Ruth who, up till this point, had relied on what was left in the field from the harvest, who faced financial insecurity day in and day out—her mother in law desired that she be in a safe place.

Doing this, however, is to take a risk. To give of her body—is a risky move. What happens is a risky move. As Boaz had been, up to this point, allowing Ruth and Naomi to subsist on his land. The cost, if Ruth was rejected, is deeply significant.

Here we also see Boaz, as Brueggemann describes in *Money and Possessions* as a powerful actor, "a prominent wealthy landowner. He is accustomed to giving direction to his workforcase as well as giving decisive guidance to community elders. Thus his administration of field and threshing floor matter to the narrative."

Here is a narrative of a person, propelled from a place of financial insecurity engaging with a person of power and privilege.

Ruth's courage and Boaz's generosity upends the systems of power.

Strikingly, we experience the hidden work of YHWH who does not conform to economic patterns of power.

It is this hidden work of YHWH that we see occur throughout our biblical texts—the ways that an alternative economy is described that upend our own individual, western narratives. Used to upend stamps of power and oppression. Used to ensure no one is left behind.

In Mark, today we hear of another story of economics:

Mark 12:38-44

12:38 As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces,

12:39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!

12:40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

12:41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.

12:42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

12:43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

12:44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

It is clear that Jesus was preoccupied with economics, with this worldly material reality. Jesus was focused on issues related to money and possessions, the ways they are deployed in the world in a world governed by God, and the ways in which they define and skew social relationships."

Often we read this passage and ministers take this opportunity to suggest that we, like that widow, should give all that we have. Brueggeman states, "It is astonishing that we in the West have been schooled to read the Gospel narratives through a privatized, otherworldly lens that transposed the story in an individualized, spiritualized account."

This narrative, deeply rooted in our independent choice, leaves out the question of how a system occurred where a widow lives in poverty and only has a penny to give. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, "Before the destruction of the temple, [the treasury] was the method used to fulfill the demands of Torah for the collection of alms for those perennially dispossessed...namely widows." By giving to the treasury, the rich were fulfilling their responsibilities so that the widow did not have to. In fact, widows were not required to give to the temple.

Mleke Vandersall states, "Widows and the perennially dispossessed were to be cared for through safety nets that were created, yet the systems weren't working and needed reimagining. This widow gives all that she has and the system fails her."

So if widows weren't required to give, why did she?

What would it mean if Jesus tells this story to use her act of giving as a way to highlight the corruption of the economic system in power? What if Jesus tells this story to show us, in contrast, a new—and yet ancient—way of sharing, distributing resources, and caring for people?

What if Jesus is perhaps shaming those that would raid a widow? The economic system that would ensure her poverty. Those that would profit by saying she was either not essential or that their lives mattered more.

What if Jesus is giving witness to the injustice of his day and proclaiming a new way of being?

What would that mean for us today?

Recently, my imagination was stirred by Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, who noted, as givers, “Now is the moment to ask not what you give back...but what do we give up?”

Ecclesial innovation is the way we reorder our common life together. Ecclesial innovation, takes place at the sight of convergence of where our own money narratives and the alternative economy scripture outlines.

Our money narratives are powerful. Psychologists talk about how we translate new information and fit it to align with our internal narratives. It's how a single event, say a conversation, can leave individuals with very different recollections. I've often found that when reflecting on God's economy and our own power and individual/collective response, our money narratives can interact in ways that keep us from imagining together.

What do you need to let go of today to invite a new way of thinking?

This past year we have been forced to reimagine how we gather, how we give, and what our common life looks like.

As a consultant I see this the work of letting go happening in community based initiatives. Outside of Ferguson, Missouri, for example, I know of a community foundation that was created by congregations where recipients determine amounts of grants, qualifications, and priorities. Where money has been given without strings attached it generated power to right imbalanced systems.

I see it happening with churches like St. Bede's in New Mexico, using their own operating budgets to pay off medical debt for thousands of individuals.

Another example is one led by Pastor Amy Butler. Invested Faith is a fund created by congregations who no longer are worshipping together but want to seed new ministries. stories like the Twinbrook Baptist congregation in Rockville, Maryland, that recognized its falling membership and decided that the most faithful use of their remaining resources would be to sell their building, close their doors, and donate \$1 million to

nonprofits who aligned with their mission. Rather than seeking to control their resources, they gave up their money as a courageous blessing to and for others.

Moving beyond survival, I've been challenged to see God moving through the shift of power. This letting go reimagines our Church as not at the center of the story—our narrative—and shifts inequity of power. It moves the Church from a place to retain power to one that is serving others.

It, reflecting the story of Ruth and the widow, responds by asking not what we can do for others but what we give up so that others have more choices and agency. In this way, the Church embodies the spirit of the calling of the people of God that persists from the old testament to today.

Now is the time for us to ask what do we need to let go of? What narratives keep us perpetuating systems where widows give their pennies?

What do we need to give up, as an act of stewardship?

To let go, rather than give back, as an act of stewardship—to invite God to disrupt our narratives and to restore our imaginations.

A poem by the Rev. Sarah Are:

Holy God,

To restore is to bring back;

So today we bring our hearts back to you,

our thoughts back to love,

and our prayers back to peace.

We try to stay in this place, but we confess,

it's never been that easy for us.

We flirt with reconciliation and then back away.

We come face-to-face with an opportunity for justice, but get scared.

We are offered an opportunity to re-write our story, but we lose our way.

Bring us back to this moment.

Bring us back to your story where brothers extend grace to one another
and even the one who denied it was forgiven.

Bring us back. Restore us. Forgive us.

Gratefully we pray,

Amen.