

Bringing in the Sheaves  
Ruth 2:2-14  
November 8, 2009

I. Yesterday I went on a glorious drive through East Texas to attend the wedding of our Jack Knox to Stephanie Moore—now Knox. The sky cleared of its burdensome clouds half-way through my drive, and as the road began to wave with the rolling hills of East Texas, the fall colors smiling at me on either side, I thought “what a lucky day for a wedding.” As the golden farmland newly shorn of its crops flashed by, I had a sense that God was smiling on Jack’s and Stephanie’s harvest of love.

We at EDCC had the good fortune of watching this couple’s love grow from a seedling of acquaintance to the full bloom of shared vows. From a chance meeting at an Area youth leaders party, they both took tentative steps of learning how to share themselves with one another. I believe that even they were surprised about how easy it was to give away their most precious parts of themselves—their hopes and dreams and futures.

A. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the process of giving away that which we hold most dear—the treasures that we hold close to our hearts. It is a complex process—it can’t be overly romanticized. For the most part, we humans are fairly selfish, wanting to keep as much as we can for our own survival and protection.

And yet, the piece of us that is created in God’s image—God, who shared of the Divine self in the first act of creation, and then later, incarnate through Jesus Christ--is always within our very act of giving when our giving is motivated by love.

B. However, sometimes it takes a while for us to recognize that God is in the very act of gift-giving, especially when we are distracted by what we *assume* are more mundane motivations.

II. This morning’s scripture is a wonderful mirror of how that realization unfolds for another couple—the Biblical love story of Boaz and Ruth.

Last week we were introduced to the female protagonist of the small book found in the Hebrew scriptures titled by her name—Ruth. She was the fearless, faithful daughter-in-law to the unlikely saint of a mother-in-law, Naomi.

This week we are introduced to the male hero, Boaz. He is a wealthy landowner, a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech, a leader in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem.

Our scripture reading tells us that it was harvest time when Ruth and Boaz's lives collided, and Boaz was bringing in the sheaves that made up his wealth from his fields.

A. Now here's a little background as to what harvest season meant to the people of that time. Besides bringing in the crops which would sustain them for the rest of the year, the theocratic system of governance also had laws that levied taxes and tithes, which were really one and the same, on the amounts brought in.

Ten percent of what Boaz harvested would go to the priests, as dictated by law. He would have also given a first-fruits offering, determined solely by his own generosity, as the amount was never specified in the text. Indeed, when the harvest was over and done with, he would have probably given 30% of his annual earnings for tithes/taxes.

Sound familiar? Then, over and above that, he was obligated by the law to leave a certain portion of his field un-harvested. The law on the books read, from Leviticus 19: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I Am the Lord Your God." (9-10)

Ruth qualified as a gleaner in both of the categories mentioned in Leviticus—she was poor and she was a sojourner—a foreigner from another country. She would have joined others, probably all women, as they followed the male reapers who carried scythes and sickles, cutting the wheat or corn stalks and

tying them into sheaves. Ruth would help with the bringing in the sheaves, and then at the end of the day, she would go back out into the field and pick up the pieces that had been left behind, or go to the corner of the field left for the poor and glean the fresh heads of wheat to take home to Naomi.

Would Boaz have been naturally inclined to give to the poor if he were not mandated to by the law? He already had to give up 30% of his income!

For that matter, if we're honest with ourselves, would we feel obligated to give to non-profits who care for the poor and the most needy if we didn't get tax credits for our charitable donations? Do we give because we are obligated to give?

Boaz's first encounter with Ruth was a giving of himself motivated by obligation. Have you ever given out of a sense of obligation? Is the memory of the gift long-lasting? Is the taste of the gift-giving sweet and sustaining? If the encounter between Boaz and Ruth had only been given out of obligation, the story would have ended there, and the world might be a different place for you and me today.

B. And there was another layer motivating his giving to the subsequent encounter Boaz had with Ruth.

You may remember that it was the custom of the early Israelites that when a woman became widowed, the closest male kindred would bring the widow into his household and take care of her—many times as his wife.

Naomi had been widowed a long time when she returned home to Bethlehem, and it doesn't appear that any of Elimelech's male relatives had followed through on bringing her into their fold, so Ruth was obliged to scratch away for their survival.

On that day when Ruth was gleaning the fields and she had inadvertently made her way to Boaz's field, Elimelech's kinsman didn't even know who she was. He had to ask one of his servants to identify her. Only when he was told that she was Naomi's daughter-in-law did he invite her to join his gleaners, receiving the

privileges of drinking from their water vessels when she was thirsty, and offering an extra portion of grain to her. In that moment, his generosity came from a sense of guilt for not following through on the patriarchal care.

How many of us have given out of a sense of guilt? Are guilt-gifts long-lasting and pleasant? Do we revel in the giving when guilt is our motivator? If the encounter between Boaz and Ruth had only been given out of guilt, the story would have ended there, and the world might be a different place for you and me today.

C. There is another negative motivator for gift-giving that Boaz didn't seem to have suffered from, which is a good thing for our story. Jesus spoke about it as he sat in a synagogue one day and watched wealthy men make a public spectacle of putting in large sums of money in the church treasury so that others could see their wealth. Then Jesus spied an elderly woman—a widow, who put everything she had as her offering. Jesus remarked on that day, "They all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

There are so many negative reasons why some people give, and the truth is for those who are the recipients of other's charity, the motivation of the giver is probably not that important.

But true, honest relationships don't grow from that kind of giving. Raw acceptance for our true selves doesn't come from negative motivations to give. Through Jesus and those that followed him, we learn that what motivates our gift-giving is crucial for our Spirit.

III. Jesus spoke to that when he told the parable of a rich farmer much like Boaz whose land brought forth plentifully. Luke 12:16-21 reads "[the rich man] thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he answered himself, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there will I store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample good laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.'

But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.'"

Later in that same chapter in Luke Jesus said, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms for those in need; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where you treasure is, there will your heart be also."

How we give helps us stay emotionally and spiritually balanced in our lives. It is a way to keep mentally healthy and on the right track. It is gift of the heart, for the heart.

The Apostle Paul uttered those familiar words that every church fundraiser likes to use, but that does indeed ask of us to check in on our own attitude toward giving when he wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians:

Remember: A stingy planter gets a stingy crop; a lavish planter gets a lavish crop. I want each of you to take plenty of time to think it over, and make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting. God loves it when the giver delights in the giving....

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you. He gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in God, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise to God. (2Cor. 9:6-9 *The Message*).

God wants us to be cheerful givers, to delight in the possibility of giving, because God delights in giving to us. God knows how much fun giving CAN be when you do it with a joyful heart. God smiles like a grandparent at Christmas time, watching with anticipation at the expressions on grandchildren's faces when they open up a gift they've been wanting.

This is the type of attitude God hopes we bring to ALL of our giving—not just to our own family, not just to our church, but as a lifestyle—a way of living and being in the world.

IV. And this is the type of giving that Boaz finally realized as the book of Ruth end. That year, he harvested more than sheaves of wheat. That year, his giving was motivated by more than just obligation, or guilt, or postures of prestige.

That year, he both harvested--and gave away-- the gift of love to a simple Moabite woman named Ruth. And because his heart was opened by love for another, precious child of God, the world is a different place for you and me.

We know that, because both their names are listed in the first Chapter of Matthew, in a long list that delights genealogists, in verse 5 where it reads, "And Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king." And then later, in verse 17, it concludes, "So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to Jesus Christ fourteen generations."

What motivates our decision to give to one another—as individuals who pledge our troth for a lifetime? As parents who pledge to raise our children? As Christians who pledge to help bring about God's realm?

I invite us to search our hearts for our answer to this as we enter into the season of giving, which begins today for us at EDCC with our Stewardship Thanks-for-Giving program, intentionally coinciding with our national Thanksgiving holiday, and moving toward Christmas and the greatest gift-giving moment motivated by love our world has ever known.

May we come rejoicing this day, bringing in the sheaves of the love God has planted within us all, sharing them abundantly with one another—and the strangers who may come into our fields hungry and thirsting for righteousness. Amen