

Unlikely Saints
Ruth 1:3-5, 15-18
November 1, 2009

To celebrate his in-law's 50th anniversary, George and his wife took them to the Holy Land, a place they had always wanted to go. Alas, while they were in Jerusalem, George's mother-in-law died.

With death certificates in hand, George went to the American Consulate Office to make arrangements to send the body back to the states for proper burial.

The Consul, after offering condolences, told George that the sending of a body back to the states for burial is very, very expensive. It could cost as much as \$5,000.00. The Consul offered that in most cases the person responsible for the remains normally decides to bury the body there. This would only cost \$150.00.

George thought for some time and then answered, "I don't care how much it will cost to send the body back; that's what I want to do."

The Consul, after hearing this, said, "You must have loved your mother-in-law very much considering the difference in price."

"No, it's not that," says George. "You see, I know of a case years ago of a person that was buried here in Jerusalem. On the third day he arose from the dead ! I just can't take that chance." (adapted from a e-joke I received on line the other day).

Mothers-in-law just don't get any respect, do they? They've been the butt of jokes for eons. In ancient Rome, the writer Juvenal once said, "Domestic concord is impossible as long as the mother-in-law lives."

Pastor David Leninger even heard tell of another minister exhorting his congregation during Stewardship time to "give as if you're giving to send your mother-in-law back home."

That's why our scripture this morning is a good corrective to the bad rap mothers-in-law have received over time. And daughters-in-law, too, for that matter.

This morning's text introduces us to a mother-in-law—Naomi—and a daughter-in-law, Ruth. This very short book in the Hebrew Scriptures gives us a glimpse of how these two women became unlikely saints of our faith—appropriate subjects on this Sunday which many in the Christian tradition observe as All Saints Day.

Before we learn more about and from our scripture's saintly heroines this morning, let's revisit what we know about those officially given the approbation of Saint. From the earliest days of the Christian movement, the first people who were revered as saints were martyrs who died under Roman persecution in the centuries after Jesus' resurrection. These martyrs were honored as saints almost instantaneously after their deaths as Christians who had sacrificed their lives in the name of God.

Over the next few centuries, however, sainthood was applied by anyone who thought their loved ones had led a pious life and suffered because of their faith. With the criteria for canonization fairly loose, the number of saints soared by the sixth and seventh centuries.

In about the 10th century Bishops stepped in to oversee the process, and around 1200, Pope Alexander III, outraged over the large numbers, decreed that only the pope had the power to determine who could be identified as a saint. (Alexander was reportedly angered about one saint in particular whom he believed had been killed in an alcohol-fueled brawl and was therefore not worthy of canonization.)

In the 17th century, the Vatican's standards for sainthood were formalized. A non-martyr would need to have performed four posthumous miracles, usually spontaneous healings. The process of canonization included two major steps: 1) Veneration, the pope's recognition that a person was worthy of consideration, which began a lengthy investigation process; and 2) Beatification, the pope's formal recognition that a person was truly a saint.

The most recent reform to the canonization process came in 1983 when Pope John Paul II streamlined the process, decreasing the number of miracles required

for beatification and canonization from four to two. Today, the church requires a team of doctors to verify their veracity and prove that miraculous healings were not the result of modern medicine. The American Catholic website states that there are now about 2500 saints listed and acknowledged. (taken from two sources: "Sainthood" by Kate Pickert, Time, Oct. 13, 2008, and AmericanCatholic.org)

However, you won't find the names of Naomi and Ruth on the list. Of course, one obvious reason is that they pre-dated Jesus—and the definition of a saint is one who follows the life of Christ closely as they live their own. Another reason is that neither one of them revealed any miraculous power. A third reason is that, in the end, the book is a love story that ends with Ruth meeting her second husband, Boaz, and they lived happily ever after—although in this day and age of soaring divorce rates, that is a miracle.

Yet it is exactly because of this story in our Bible that tells the tale of two very ordinary women that we get a glimpse of what it means to be an unlikely saint.

We heard read this morning the tragic circumstances of Naomi's life. First, that her home town of Ephratha—later known as Bethlehem—was stricken with a famine so that her husband Elimelech the Ephrathite moved the family to the neighboring nation of Moab in order that they might survive. While in that foreign land, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a single mother.

We can only imagine how Naomi fought to raise her sons in a land where she had no male kindred to look after her. Much like the pioneer women in our own nation when confronted with a similar plight, Naomi had to do both the work of the mother and the father to provide for her children.

She raised Mahlon and Chilion to the point they were married to good Moabite women. But then tragedy struck again—every woman's nightmare. Both of her sons died—we're not told of the cause, but since it seems they died near the same time, we can guess that something epidemic like the swine flu that felled them.

If suffering is one of the marks of sainthood, Naomi fits the bill. There are those in this room who know the pain of losing a partner and spouse. It feels as if an

appendage has been painfully torn from your side, and an emptiness threatens to swallow you.

But when you go through a loss such as that from either death or divorce and there are young children involved, you forge ahead. There are those of you here today who are valiantly single-parenting. You know how very difficult it is to have to juggle all the jobs there are in a family to create a safe and well-provided for home for your children. It takes strength, endurance, courage. Naomi must have had that.

And then, to add insult to injury, death took the two boys whom Naomi had labored so hard to bring into the world, and then to raise. Those in this room who have lost children before their time know the heartache that you carry with you all the days of your life. So it was with Naomi.

If enduring hardship and suffering make a saint, then Naomi certainly should be crowned one.

And if persistent love and courageous compassion make a saint, then Ruth should certainly be crowned one, too.

In part of the text we didn't hear read this morning, both daughters in law accompanied Naomi when she decided she wanted to go back to her home in Bethlehem. Even though she discouraged the girls, they both loved her so much they wanted to stay with her.

Naomi must have been a saint to have been treated so well by her daughters in law!

But when they got to the boundary separating their homeland from Naomi's, Orpah decided to go back to her home. After all, she was still of marriageable age, and her family would help her find another husband. Ruth, however, stubbornly stayed with Naomi. The older woman insisted, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister in law.

And that's when Ruth spoke her famous words of fealty—"Entreat me not to leave you, or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you."

Naomi might have been a special mother in law, but Ruth was some kind of daughter in law—a pure representation of loyalty and compassionate care for family—even if there was no blood relationship.

If honest, raw expressions of dedicated love make a saint, then Ruth certainly should be crowned one. She courageously left her home to travel to her mother-in-law's land where they both would have to start over—two widow women with nothing. If she had gone back to her own people, Ruth, like Orpah, would have had a good chance to finding another husband to take care of her, to give her the chance to birth babies.

But her selfless devotion to her husband's mother makes her a very unlikely saint.

And though you won't find her name amongst the 2500 saints listed in the Catholic encyclopedia, you will find her name included in another list, found in Chapter 1 of Matthew, in the genealogy of Jesus Christ—the greatest miracle the world has ever known.

What makes a saint a saint? It is true that this determination only comes at the end of a life, when we reflect back on the impact a person has had on others, on the world.

This morning, I'd like for you to sit for a moment and think about those that you would call unlikely saints—those ordinary people who lived life fully, courageously, lovingly, and made a difference to you in your world. In a moment of silence, let's lift up our thanksgiving for those people who you would identify as a saint of your life.

(silence)

In closing, I want to tell you about another unlikely saint. Her name was Agnes, and she grew up in what is now known as the Republic of Macedonia, but when she was born at the turn of the twentieth century it was still a part of the Ottoman empire.

Agnes' father died when she was about eight years old. Her mother—like Naomi, another widow bringing up her children by herself—did everything she could to provide for her children.

To be honest, Agnes was a very homely, ordinary looking girl. She was teased by her siblings that she would never find a husband. Perhaps that's why she made the decision to enter a convent. But another reason was that she was intrigued by the stories of missionaries who came to speak to her church about the world in which they worked. Their words transported her to foreign lands that she knew she would never visit if she chose to remain at home with her mother. So at the age of 18 she decided to attend The Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ireland. There, she became a Sister of Loreto, and took on the job of teaching children in a Catholic school in Calcutta. She later became principal of that school.

Day after day, she stepped over or around people who had no place to live but the streets. Many of them were ill, some were dying with no place to go. One day, at the age of 36, she asked her superiors for permission to end her teaching and to move, all alone, to one of the poorer sections of the city. She was given that permission, which would set her life on a new course that she could never imagine.

Her calling, as she understood it, was to minister to the poorest of the poor. She wanted to provide a place for people to come or be brought to die, so that their lives would not have to end alone on the street. She wanted them to know that someone cared, that they had a friend.

She accepted Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians without asking what religion they belonged to. Instead, she said that in each face she saw the face of Christ, and that as she ministered to each dying person, she was doing the same for Christ.

This ordinary woman, whom we now know from her journals suffered from self-doubt and dark despair, persevered with courageous compassion and left a legacy of love through her Missionaries of Charity. She was asked to speak to important gatherings and was bestowed degrees from major universities. She was awarded the Nobel Prize and was honored to spend time with the Pope.

Yet all these honors paled before this small woman dressed in a white sari with a blue cross and blue trim. It was her friends whose bodies she washed and her spirits she lifted who were the really important ones. The honor was in serving them and thus in serving her Lord.

Of course, you know Agnes' name was changed when she took her orders in 1937. From that day forward, she was known as Teresa. Mother Teresa is now synonymous with the word "saint" in our day and age, and yet she never felt herself more unlikely—and most unworthy—of that appellation.

That's just the way God works—taking something very ordinary and making it extraordinary—like a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law and a homely nun. Maybe even like you and like me.

Amen