

PERSPECTIVE AND RE-EVALUATION
Ruth 3: 1-5, 4: 13-17; Mark 12: 38-44
Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time • November 7, 2021
by Pat Berger

Our readings for today feature women. The women who are featured, in both cases, are widows. We remember that widows in Bible times were in precarious circumstances in society. Naomi, a widow, decided to go back to her homeland and presumably to whatever of her family remained there; Ruth insisted on going with her -- neither of these were easy decisions, or maybe even smart ones, Ruth's even less than Naomi's. In search of safety, Naomi and Ruth took some mighty risks.

The word for widow in Hebrew includes the meaning of "one who is silent," and "one who is unable to speak." The culture was very much divided along gender lines. Men were the ones who were out in the world, working, holding positions in business and/or synagogue. Women? Remember that saying, "children should be seen and not heard?" Well, in the Mediterranean world at that time, it might have sounded more like, "children and women should not be seen and not be heard." Women stayed in the home, with the children; if they had something to say, they had better figure out a way for their husbands to say it. And widows? It goes back to that Hebrew definition: "one who is unable to speak."

There weren't Joint Rights of Survivorship; a man's property stayed in his family on his death. So if there were no sons to inherit property, the widow was left with nothing, or very close to that. As a result, widows were a problem in that society. Day to day living was difficult. On Naomi's return to her own country as a widow, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, also a widow: what would be the response of the Hebrew people?

It seems that, not unlike in families today, Naomi's family had the privilege of learning to live with people they did not choose. As Martin Copenhaver writes, "Our fidelity to those we are stuck with can be a

reflection of the fidelity of a God who is stuck with us all. . . . God does not abandon God's people when the going gets tough. . . . God's fidelity is beyond choice." In this story, God worked in surprising ways through surprising people -- not the first time any of us have heard of this -- to bring about good for the Kingdom. Ruth gave all that she had, and one result was a son, Obed, who became the father of Jesse, who became the father of David, and we know that eventually that line led directly to Jesus.

Who, by the way, in our reading from the Gospel of Mark, had just noticed that a poor widow had put two coins into the treasury -- "everything she had, all she had to live on." The treasury, I read, was in the Women's Court at the temple, and consisted of 13 large, metal trumpet-shaped containers into which one could loudly put one's offering. The commentary said that some people who might not have put in money out of generosity might have put money in because it made a loud noise. (!!)

And the two coins that the woman put in the jar were the least coin of their currency, but still were worth more than a penny. They might have represented the price of a biscuit so that the woman might have had lunch.

The place of the widow had not changed from Ruth's time to Jesus' time. The obligation was still to maintain one's status, to do nothing whatever that would change or endanger it. John Pilch writes, "If . . . this woman has given to the temple 'all she had to live on,' the woman has acted very shamefully. She has deliberately worsened her status." Even if -- maybe especially if -- one were giving money to the temple, it would have been very wrong for a needy person to give sacrificially and thus sink deeper into poverty. As a result, many commentators do not think Jesus was praising this woman -- more likely, he was lamenting a system which taught sacrificial giving -- and then, he watched as the temple leaders who taught that system spent those gifts on their own desires (long robes and good seats in the synagogue and at banquets, in today's reading) instead of on those around them who were sometimes in dire need. This is how the houses of the widows were "devoured." The coins represented much more than money to this woman; they were a response, the faith response that

she had been taught; the faithful ones would go beyond rituals and piety to a level of giving -- both of money and of self -- that would represent to all who and whose they were. The scribes had bought into the measure of their success being: looking out for number one, and, were they better off than they had been before.

But that isn't the way that God set things up. One author suggested that we look again at the Ten Commandments, rules dictated by God in order that we care for each other. The Commandments can seem as if too much is being asked, until we remind ourselves: these Commandments are our neighbor's Commandments also. The expectation is for everyone. We aren't in this alone; we are members of communities -- families, neighborhoods, churches, other groups -- all of us together in need and in caring. We are at the end of our stewardship drive for this year, and in that process it is too easy for any of us to think that we don't have enough money to give, or we don't have enough time to give, or there isn't anything that we can do that can possibly benefit the Kingdom. Oh, sure.

God didn't set things up that way. The budget that the Session works on and approves is a result of small gifts and large gifts and many gifts in between, and much of what Plymouth achieves during the coming year will be because each one of us promised what we could. And much of what Plymouth will achieve for the Kingdom this year is because of who each one of us is and how we use that, here at the church and in our families and in our community and around the world. We would be stunned, any of us, if we were asked to give as Ruth gave, if we were asked to give our last two very small coins. But we must do what we can do -- THAT is how we are the congregation that is Plymouth -- the Plymouth that helps to make St. Helens and the rest of God's world what they are.

Let us pray.