

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

November 8, 2015; 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings:Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Psalm 127; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.

Abundant Life Through God

Our readings from The Book of Ruth and Mark's Gospel both contain widows and examples of steadfast love and God's abundant grace seen in the lives of people.

Both are about relationships, how we understand them, what our actions based on our understand means for us, for others, for God.

Contributing to my sermon today is also our abundant joy in baptizing Everly, and welcoming back her family for this wonderful celebration.

Though they live in Rockville MD now, Holy Comforter remains an important point of contact with God, an important part in their faith journey, and we are delighted to be the community that welcomes Everly into the life of grace, into the fellowship of the Church, as her Christian journey officially begins.

As we consider the theme of abundance, we proclaim that baptism is God's gift to us; baptism is God's way of showering abundant love upon us, and that through our decision to be baptized and to have our children baptized we are responding to God's abundant love.

...by making a commitment...by embracing God's desire for covenant relationship with us.

The Book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

To review, to bring us to our reading today, as the story begins, there is a famine in Judah, Naomi her husband and her two sons go to Moab to escape the famine, and there Naomi's husband dies;

her two sons marry, but 10 years later, the sons die.
 The three widows are left to take care of themselves.
 This situation of being without husbands was a disaster, with little hope of
 being able to maintain life on their own.
 In ancient times, this was always the case; and of course can still be today.
 Just this week the Wall Street Journal had an article about the war widows
 of Afghanistan; as I read the article and looked at the gripping
 pictures, I was reminded of Naomi and Ruth, and how things
 have not changed much for some women in our world.¹
 Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to leave her and go find new husbands...in
 loving them, she was willing to let them go and be alone rather than
 bringing them down with her...Naomi was willing to die.
 Orpha goes, which was the right thing to do, the expected and respected
 thing to do, but, as the Bible tells us, Ruth does the unexpected,
 foolish thing, Ruth clings to Naomi, and says:

‘Do not press me to leave you
 or to turn back from following you!
 Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
 Where you die, I will die—
 there will I be buried.
 May the LORD do thus and so to me,
 and more as well,
 if even death parts me from you!’²

Remember that as a Moabite, Ruth was not Jewish, but she had lived with
 Naomi and her sons for 10 years, she had learned about God and in
 this story it is Ruth, a gentile, who is held up as an example of

¹ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/after-decades-of-conflict-many-struggle-to-survive-on-their-own-1446601663>

² Ruth 1:16-17

what steadfast love looks like; steadfast love that demonstrates to the world the steadfast abundant love of God, what that looks like lived by people.

Ruth is the hero of the story.

And as we come to the end of the story, we see that she becomes central to God's story in the world with God's chosen people...Ruth and Boaz marry, Naomi is saved through this, and God's salvation history moves forward, the son from the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, Obed, will be the grandfather of King David.

Ruth's steadfast faithfulness to Naomi, a woman not of her tribe, allows God to work in and through her life.

God at work through people...miracles of trust and connection, but not superhuman miracles...not a burning bush, but God showed Ruth the way and she followed.

God worked through Ruth's feelings, her love for Naomi.

It is so important to know this way of God...acting through people.

Last week we focused on Jesus and the raising of Lazarus.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is also about bringing life from death, and in a way that is more familiar to us...through inspired human faithfulness and devotion.

Into God's story of God's people, today we baptize Everly, and through her baptism she will be united with God in this ongoing story of salvation.

How fitting that we have a Biblical account of strong, faithful women today, this day as Everly is baptized to be led by the Holy Spirit to be strong and faithful in life's adventure with God.

The story of Ruth shows us that God has a role for everyone; every person is God's beloved child, chosen by God to live and to share ourselves in ways that make a difference in the world.

Through baptism, we are all connected with Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, King David....all because God came to us in Jesus, inviting us all to

be part of the story.

As I say the prayer over the water today, you hear that great sweep of history...God's story...all leading up to this moment, to us being here today, to Everly's baptism.

Baptism is about God's abundance, the abundance of God's love, and God's desire for close connection with everyone...enabling us to to be people of covenant.

Baptism makes us all part of God's salvation history...and baptism also unites Everly and all who are baptized to each other in one community, one family...like Ruth who was not born to be a hero of Judaism, nor born Jewish, none of us were born Christians, we, or our parents for us, decided to welcome this invitation from God to share in God's abundant love through baptism...to make our covenant with God...to acknowledge through what we have promised, in our baptismal vows that we will renew today, that our relationship with God and each other and our fellow human beings...that relationship is the core of our lives and our faith.

Isn't that what the poor widow in Mark's gospel is saying?

By her act of great devotion?

She puts in all that she has...she is all in...because relationship with God is everything.

We are in this time of pledging, and I want to be clear, our church is not asking us to give everything that we have...but we are challenged by this Gospel reading to consider how we respond to God's abundance, to God's abundant love?

In this reading, Jesus says that the others gave out of their abundance...did they even know that they had an abundance or were they feeling hesitant even to give what they did?

I have a feeling they did not see themselves as having abundant wealth, or the freedom that they had to do a lot for God, God's mission in the

world.

The widow had more freedom than the rich because the widow had a sense of God's abundance....she gave out of that sense, of God's abundance, in which she shared.

The widow also had more respect in the eyes of Jesus than did the scribes in long robes, who said long prayers, and walk around seeking respect from the people.

It can be hard for us to remember that by holding up this widow as virtuous, Jesus was shocking his listeners.

Jesus brought everyone together and respected the dignity of all, which is one of the promises that we make in our baptismal covenant.

Baptism itself is a great equalizer, while at the same time each person is precious to God...all are welcome to the transformative waters of baptism, and through baptism we become brothers and sisters in Christ, equals, regardless of how much money we have, or our race, or our gender, or our gender identity, or our sexual orientation...we are all equal.

Our greatness, our abundance, comes from God.

God's abundant love has been at work in our world since the moment of creation...at work in many ways, through many people and situations.

How can we claim what is our birthright through baptism?

How can we open ourselves to the possibilities that exist when we know God's abundance in our lives and live out of that, rather than fear or a sense of scarcity?

May Everyly's baptism give us all a renewed sense of God's abundant love and a sense of God's salvation. Amen.