

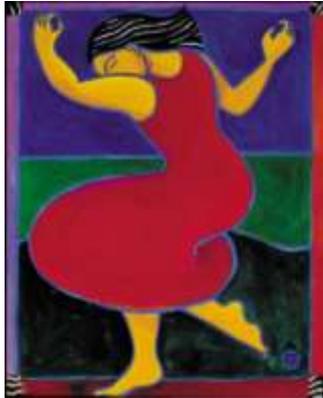
# Pilgrim UCA, 18.11.2018

Ruth 3:1-11, 4:13-17 Mark 12:38-44

## “... Faith in Action”



Two women. Two widows. One whose name is mentioned, one who is unnamed, like so many others. Two women of faith. Here's another.



I know she's a woman of faith because she's dancing.

Barefoot. With her eyes closed. Letting the music carry her. She trusts herself to the dance, and to the beauty of the music which is, for this moment, her life.

(One of my favourite pics ever: called “*Red Dress Dancing*”, by Anna Oneglia.)

I treasure it because it is, for me, a vision of courage and faith that is alive. It speaks to me of the life of GOD's spirit in the world. Some of you know that the image of the trinity in GOD as a divine dance, is very precious to me. This picture speaks to me of human participation in that dance: of being fully present to that dance. Practically, I'm a dancer with two right feet, which is a problem for a left-footer. But GOD's invitation is not to be perfect, just to let myself hear the music and get involved in the life of GOD's spirit dance.

Our scriptures today tell us of two woman of faith, only one of whom gets a name: Ruth. We were introduced to her 2 weeks ago. I postponed continuing her story last week because of Remembrance Day.

I'll come back to her, but first I want to pay attention for a few moments to the woman in our other story; the one who *doesn't* get named. She appears as Jesus and his friends are sitting around at the Temple in Jerusalem. She also appears in a great many 'stewardship sermons' as the giver of the famous '*widow's mite*': although the way that story is named, the greater interest is in what she puts in the box than in her person. Apart from that, she's largely ignored, and I think that's part of the reason it's an important story. It's important because Jesus notices her, when no one else much seems to do so! In the hurly burly of the Temple crowd, she may well pass un-noticed, but Jesus sees her.

And he sees something else too. He sees that her gift to the Temple amounts to all she has.

It's unclear how that can be the case - presumably he doesn't have access to her banking details - and for the gospel tellers that's not important anyway. What's important for them is that Jesus sees her action as one of costly generosity, and that he sees her at all.

(We can - and should - consider the ethics of a faith community allowing its people to give to the point of destitution, but that's for another time. For now it's enough to recognise that “*she has given all she has*” doesn't mean she's given all she has “*until next pay day*”. It may well be that her investment in the service of the temple comes at the cost of her life).

Faithful indeed! And Jesus notices. He watches her dance GOD's dance.

And then there's Ruth. When we left her two weeks ago, she had chosen to accompany her mother in law Naomi back to Bethlehem: Naomi's home, not Ruth's. Ruth had chosen to become a foreigner, a stranger, out of her love and faithfulness to her Mother in law. My suggestion then was that Naomi saw in Ruth, the face of her GOD.

When we pick up the story in the passages read this morning, we have something of a problem. The readings this morning have left us with great gaps in the story of Ruth. I thought of having the whole book read in church, but it takes a while and there's a concert in here this afternoon...

So instead I want to address some of what we do read and some of what we don't, and encourage you to read the whole thing when you go home.

For me, the problem with the way our lectionary has treated the book, is that the bits left in are largely about how the people around Ruth treat and relate to her, rather than what she does. (chapter 3:6-11 is more about her action, but I added that to our reading.) If we go simply by what's in the lectionary, Ruth is a passive character subject to the whims of her Mother in Law Naomi, her eventual husband Boaz, and the relative who's interested in Naomi's land but not if Ruth is part of the deal!

(Actually there's another interesting puzzle in there: Naomi tells Ruth in chapter one that she has no relatives to look after her, and no prospects. It turns out that not only has she some relatives but a plot of land that she forgot about. There seem to be some fascinating ethics at work here... Anyway).

Naomi's plot - now that Ruth has tagged along - seems to be to get her noticed supported by her relative Boaz, who's done alright for himself.

At her insistence Ruth goes into Boaz' paddocks to 'glean' after the harvesters. (Gleaning' was part of the society's provision for looking after poor people. The harvesters had to make sure to leave heads on some of the grain stalks, and poor people were allowed to come along behind and collect some of what wasn't harvested. Ruth does this, Boaz notices her, finds out who she is, and goes a step further in his generosity: he invites her to help herself to water from his harvester's supply, and commands the harvesters to let her do so without interference.

So Boaz is established in the story as a man of good character, and that's about where it all sits for a while. Naomi seems to have further plans for Ruth, maybe hoping that Boaz will take her as a concubine, because anything more than that would involved a mixed marriage. So Naomi tells Ruth to up the ante a bit and make Boaz notice her by getting all dressed up and paying her Boaz a night time visit. According to Naomi, Ruth is to quietly go to where Boaz is asleep. She is to 'uncover his feet', and lay there with him. Now we don't need to get a schoolboy giggly about this, but "feet" in this context and in the Hebrew, was often a euphemism for another part of the male anatomy.

Boaz wakes: "*Who are you?*" "*I am Ruth, your servant*" (some other translations say "companion") It's here that Ruth goes beyond Naomi's instruction. Instead of simply lying passively, and waiting for Boaz to take charge, Ruth, continues her dance of faith on her own terms, not those of others.

"*Spread your cloak over your companion, because you are next of kin!*" Ruth says (Ruth 3:9). Instead of just lying at Boaz's feet and effectively becoming Boaz's property, Ruth invites him to pull his cloak over her and become her husband. And he's impressed enough by her to do just that.

As we see in Chapter 4 there's a bit more to the story; some negotiation with yet another relative of Naomi's, using as a bargaining chip that block of land that Naomi inherited from her husband Elimelech, when he died in chapter 1! It's convoluted, but basically the other (male) relative was closer than Boaz to Elimelech and thus had first rights to buy the land from Naomi He was keen until Boaz said "*Oh, by the way, if you take the land you also get Ruth, the daughter in law, to look after*". That changes things for the relative and he generously(!) offers Boaz first option to buy. Which he does.

I'm a fan of the lectionary, the set of readings created for use in churches. It offers a pretty good sweep of scripture, and a good spiritual discipline for churches and ministers in worship. But in the case of Ruth, I think it misses the mark quite badly. There are many different ideas, and themes there, that can speak to us of GOD in the lives of the people of GOD.

If we see nothing else in it, we must see Ruth as an active participant in the story. She doesn't appear in the later genealogies by accident, and she's by no means a passive bystander. Her story is told, recorded, and preserve, because her people saw in her the life of GOD!

Yes, her story is a story of her time and culture: a time and culture where she was dependent on others to a large degree. But Boaz notices her and honours her of what he sees in her: a persistent, honourable, faithful person, who speaks to him of his GOD. Together they become part of the genealogy of Israel and of Jesus, but that's not why we should remember Ruth.

We should remember Ruth because of what we see in her. At the end of the book, the neighbourhood women bless YHWH (GOD) for the birth of Ruth's son Obed. But more than that they remind Naomi what this story has been about all the way through. This child is special because he is the child of Ruth: "*...your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven Israelite sons*" (Ruth 4:15). Maybe strangely, this is the only time in the whole book that the word "love" appears, and it's clearly about Ruth's undying love for Naomi. This foreign widow is worth more than "seven sons"!

She heard the music of Naomi's and Boaz's GOD, and she dared to dance...

AMEN