

How do we honor our dead? Having researched our family genealogy, I have visited a lot of cemeteries. There is something powerful to recognizing your ancestors remains are in a place they lived. Coming to the Desert Southwest, we had to get accustomed that in the desert everything dehydrates, and the ground is so rocky, that we inter ash remains rather than burying a casket with the body. In my latter years in New York, we encountered a new dilemma. Couples had moved to Arizona, Florida, South Carolina for retirement. They had died in those places and their families had had memorials to honor them, then shipped the casket to their family cemetery. With only the Funeral Director and the Casket and myself, what are we supposed to do to honor their burial? DO we say a prayer? Do we tell their stories and tell God of resurrection? How do we honor the dead, without family, friends, community? One of my family's stories of coming to America is of a Scotsman with his wife and their 12 children, who travelled to Ireland to book passage on a sailing ship to America. While waiting for the Ship to port, the father got into a Steeplechase horse race, where he fell from his horse breaking his neck and dying. His wife reasoned that there was little more she could do for him, and his wish had been for their family to cross to America, so she left his body there, boarded the ship with her 12 children and came to America. By stark contrast I prefer the story of Ruth.

Throughout the Scriptures, especially this book, names have meaning. So what does it mean to have "ruth" in yourself; or to be "ruth" to others? We know the antithesis, what it is to be "ruthless," but the point of this book being included in the Canon of Holy Scripture is there is something sacred and holy in what is here identified as the quality of being "ruth."

My Old Testament Professor at Seminary described Ruth as "A Human Comedy of a man's world telling a woman's story. The aged female version of Job: Naomi, and the youthful Foreigner: Ruth, struggle for survival in a patriarchal world. Ruth is a Moabite, a Canaanite, who after a decade of marriage was a childless widow, without any prospects, who leaves her parents and community, culture, religion, home. These women bear their own burdens... No God promises blessings... no man rushes to be their savior. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation, in the midst of what is alien, hostile, bitter and unknown. One childless woman has bound her life to another female, in the world of the Judges where life depended upon men, who often forgot God. There is no more radical choice in all the memories of Israel than that of Ruth."

Like many couples in the 1950s, my parents used this passage in their Wedding, which seemed so very appropriate as my father's first wife had died and our Mom was not only marrying him but at age 40 also taking 3 sons. HOWEVER, making Ruth's vow a reading for weddings domesticates the story of Ruth, by eliminating all Biblical context, where every word, every name, every action is layered in meaning.

When and where does this Scripture unfold? After the time of Moses & Joshua, before the time of Kings, when each man did what was right in his own heart, regularly forgetting there even is a God, later asking for redemption.

Further emphasizing something is odd, this family are from Bethlehem, which like "The Garden" referring to Eden, "Valley Verde" meaning Green Valley, "Bethlehem" not only will be the birthplace of King David and of Jesus, literally means The Bread Basket, and yet there is such a famine in the land, that this family goes in exile across the Jordan to the foreign land of Moab, today the country of Jordan. In the time of the Judges, "famine" like draught or plague were understood to be punishments from God. The name of the man is Elimelek, El meaning God, Melek meaning King, means "God is my king" and yet, "God is my king" goes into Exile and dies apart from from Israel.

Their two sons are named Mahlon meaning "Sickly" and Chilion meaning "Going to Die." Why they are named this by their parents is a legitimate question, but this becomes foreshadowing because after ten years in Moab both fall ill and die. HOWEVER, as hopeless as this setting, the men have made the circumstance for the women worse, because each of the Sons of Israel violated the cultural laws of Israel by taking non-Jewish Moabite Wives, yet in ten years of marriage neither was able to conceive a child.

We hear this story and through our culture reconcile, so these women did not have to raise children on their own, the children were not taken by Child Protective Services, other men might still be interested in marrying them as single women without children. But in the book of Leviticus, Judaism had what appears to us a strange set of Laws about honoring the Dead Husband. Women were powerless, women could not go out and get a job, women could not inherit, women were considered as being the property of their father until given to their husband. But if his property with no rights of their own, what happens if he dies? IF THE Husband died, then his family had a responsibility to provide for his wife IN ORDER TO produce heirs for the family's dead, by having the next nearest relative take responsibility for the wife. This becomes even more messy, because along with acceptance of the wife, while the second husband inherits everything that belonged to the first husband, any children that the second husband has with this wife are then considered to be children of the first husband, and when the second husband dies, half of all of his estate goes to the first husband's children, and the other half is divided among the children of his other wives.

Naomi, the Mother, whose name meant "Sweet as Candy" chooses to change her name to Mara meaning "BITTERNESS." What a statement of identity! She asks the daughters what she herself feels, after being taken away from her home and community, losing her husband and her sons: "Should I still have Hope?"

The plight of each woman was that she herself could not inherit, if there were not a suitable husband among the nearest relatives, she could be returned to her father's household if he could still provide for her, she could become a beggar, or a prostitute, those were her only choices. All of which explains Naomi instructing the daughters'-in-law to go back to their fathers, because she has no logical possibility of other sons. The one daughter "Orpah," whose name means "Back of the neck" embraces Naomi and Ruth showing the back of her neck before returning to her father.

Ruth does not simply choose: "I will go with you..." Instead, Ruth makes a sacred vow of commitment: "Do not entreat me to leave you, or to turn back from following you. For where you go, I will go, where you live I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I shall die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also, if even death separates you from me." As my professor had said, there is NO MORE RADICAL CHOICE in all Scripture... that is to have RUTH. Generations later is this not the commitment of Jesus Christ "even death will not separate us from God."

As a community, as a church, as the body of Christ in this place, we have been extremely blessed. COVID19 has become a new euphemism for death, for a modern day international plague. More people have died from this than from the Spanish Flu, or any disease since the Bubonic Plague. YET in all of this, we have been spared. One member, locked-down in an assisted care facility, at the very beginning of this disease died, otherwise, this body of Christ has been passed over. We have had persons become ill. We have had family and friends who have died, but we were passed over in deaths. One reason for sorrow has been that throughout 2020 we were unable to gather together. We do not begrudge that for them pain and suffering has ended, or that they are with God forever more. We attempted to honor our deaths, but we could not touch, we could not hug and embrace to weep, not with our dead or even with

one another. SO in this celebration of All Saints we recognize those whom we have already commended to GOD in 2020; and then we commend to God those 13 who have entered the church eternal this year.

506 years ago, Father Martin Luther on All Saints' Day nailed to the doors of the church he served 95 Theses, that all the world coming to pray for the souls of those who have become our saints, would be challenged to live life in a re-formed way, with greater integrity and meaning because we have lived through death, and we know God's commitment to us that not even death could separate us, and so we have hope.