



“Sacred Solidarity”

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Eden United Church of Christ, Hayward, California
All Saints Sunday

November 5, 2006

Ruth 1:1-18 (NRSV)

Today I want to tell you a story about a woman who I came to know more than a decade ago while serving a pastorate in Elmira, New York. Her name was Penelope Petros, or “Penny” to most of us.

Penny was the matriarch of St. Athanasios’ Greek Orthodox Church, which is to say that she was the matriarch of a patriarchal church, and therefore, she had no formal authority, but tons of influence. No one messed with Penny. She was a powerhouse. One of her long-time friends once confided to me, “The priest only thinks he leads our church. Penny’s the heart and soul (and brains) of the organization.”

Penny was a spiritual tour de force to be sure, and she had the physique to match it. At the time I met her, Penny was in her early 70s, and running at top speed. She maintained a small bakery business out of her home, chaired the women’s group at her church, ran her congregation’s annual Greek festival, and participated in more ecumenical events in the community than most of my clergy colleagues.

Penny was a buxom woman who stood about 5’6” in her black “granny shoes,” and had a waistline that advertised the quality of her baklava. Every Christmas when I would stop by to pick up a box of her wonderful baklava for Stephanie she would say to me, “Arlene, do you want to know the secret to the best baklava?”

“Sure,” I said. “What is it?”

“Butter. Buy the best butter. And don’t skimp!”

Believe me. Penny did not skimp.

So, as you may imagine, Penny had a big presence and a big heart. She also had big hair to go with that big physique. It was thick and black, thanks to Miss Clairol, and it swept around her head in a kind of neo-Victorian style that balanced her torso and that was reminiscent of frenetic day in the kitchen.

There was no mistaking it. Penny was a quintessential Greek matron.

I met Penny Petros for the first time at an ecumenical Bible Study that I was conned into leading by a couple of the matriarchs from my own congregation, The Park Church in Elmira.

Our Bible Study theme that year was based on Church Women United's Ruth and Naomi curriculum. In an effort to make a good impression, I prepared a thorough analysis of all the dead German theologians' commentaries on this Old Testament novella, and imagined the several ways that I would bring all the best new feminist interpretations to bear on the text at various points in the lesson.

The participants were politely intrigued by my research, which was gratifying because of the effort, but the true reward of having lead that Bible Study was hearing the personal reflection on the biblical text that were shared by the lay women. I was humbled by the depth of their faith, and their profound abilities to exegete the text based on personal experience and practical theological reflection. Clearly, they brought far more to the study table than all the dead Germans, and all of the up-and-coming Western feminists whose work I had been citing. This was, Bible Study at its best, and—commercial—what we are striving for with our Sunday morning Adult Bible Study.

Penny's insights into the text were particularly memorable. She spoke from the heart about how she saw herself and her mother in-law in the text. She said, "Twice I was widowed. The first time was euphemistic, when my husband went off to war, and the second was when he died a premature death."

Penny went on to explain how she had met and married her husband in New York City, but when he was shipped out to Europe, he sent her to his hometown to live with his recently widowed mother. At the time of her move, Penny said that she knew no one in Elmira, and desperately missed the big city, her family, and her newlywed husband.

Her mother in law was empathetic and set out to help her by teaching her old family recipes—a gift that would keep on giving when her husband came home from the war, and much later when he died an early death and the mortgage had to be paid off.

Penny's relationship with her mother-in law seemed to mirror the lives of Ruth and Naomi. It also reflected the spirit of the text and one of its most important themes, which in Hebric terms is *chesed*, which means "loyalty or faithfulness arising from commitment."

II

The book of Ruth is about an ordinary family who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. Elimelech moves his two sons and wife Naomi from Bethlehem, in Judah to Moab during a famine. During the family's sojourn in Moab, Elimelech and Naomi's two sons marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth.

Over a decade, the men of the family die, leaving their three widows: Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah.

In the strict patriarchal system of their culture, these women were dependent on their husbands, sons, and brothers-in-law for economic survival. With all of their men dead, the women's lives were in profound jeopardy. In desperation, Naomi resolved to return to her homeland, and to her husband's family (who have the responsibility to support and protect her, as Elimelech's widow) and she urges her two daughters-in-law to return to their Moabite families for similar reasons.

Orpah took Naomi's advice, but Ruth pledged her undying devotion to her mother-in-law, and returned with Naomi to Bethlehem during the time of the barley harvest.

In order to provide for the two women, Ruth received permission to glean in the fields of her relative, Boaz. Naomi sends Ruth to ask protection from Boaz and Ruth successfully negotiates a deal by which both women are taken into his household, thus securing the women's survival, the lineage of Elimelech, and the birth line to the house of King David, and ultimately to Jesus.

The genealogy that concludes the book of Ruth climaxes with the wonderful disclosure that Ruth of Moab is the great-grandmother of King David. And where Ruth leaves off, the Gospel of Matthew picks up explaining the lineage of Ruth to Jesus.

So the book of Ruth is on the one hand, about the continuity of King David's ancestry, which is kind of interesting if you're a genealogist. But perhaps even more interesting and more important is that the book of Ruth is about *chesed*, which has to do with compassion and companionship, or in more modern terms, with solidarity.

Chesed may be expressed between God and individuals and groups of people, or between members of a family or community. In the Biblical account of Ruth, the main characters, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all manifest acts of *chesed*.

Naomi shows concern for the welfare of her widowed daughters-in-law, especially Ruth, although she is not bound by law or custom to care for them.

Ruth's *chesed* in clinging to Naomi exceeds all expectations, especially after wooing Boaz and remarrying.

A third theme reflected in the book of Ruth has to do with an openness and affirmation that the role of foreigners can play in the life of the Jewish people, and ultimately in our Judeo-Christian faith.

The book of Ruth emerged in the history of Ancient Israel during the pre-monarchical period. That was the period after the Israelites had entered the Promised Land, but before the establishment of the monarchy. Nation building, which is to say, ethnic purity and advancement, were highly valued. So, here in this context, we have a story about two women who defy convention, who are not related by blood or obligated to each other by Jewish law, who become for the Israelite people the model of faithfulness, and the human embodiment of God's constant companionship with Israel and the whole human community.

Do you hear that? The foreigner, the woman, the widow—Ruth—becomes for Israel, the model of faithfulness by which the natives individually and collectively will strive to follow.

III

So, the book of Ruth serves three purposes literarily: 1) it accounts for the ancestry of David and ultimately of Jesus, 2) it expresses the meaning and importance of *chesed* (or solidarity), and 3) it opens up to those of us who read the Bible as "insiders" to the possibility that "outsiders" may be the ones whom we might set our compass on as we strive to embody our calling as the people of God.

Interesting as Ruth is literarily though, the ultimate power of the text lies with its ability to affirm and encourage us to express God's *chesed* in our relationships with each other.

I suspect that most of us have lived long enough to have experienced both the disappointment of discovering that some whom we had thought would be with us—rain or shine—were not, and the blessing of finding traveling companions whom we had never expected, who help us bear our load.

Hardship often exposes us to the quality and strength of our relationships and our character. Fair-weather friends are easy to come by. But traveling companions who embody God's *chesed* are few and far between. So, we must cultivate them, and care for them, be there for them, and realize that they are a gift from God. Indeed God is in these relationships. God is wherever two or more are gathered in solidarity.

Sometimes we find that *chesed* in the relationships in which convention says we are supposed to find it, but more often than not, the reverse is true. A poem titled “Who is Your Family?” by Linda Dini Jenkins, underscores this point.

Who is Your Family?

The Book of Ruth

If the bitter old woman who has nothing good to say
Who tells you you’re a failure
Who says you’re just like your father and you’ll
Never amount to anything
Who sneers at your choices
And mocks your endeavors—
If this woman is your grandmother, mother, sister:
Is she family?

If the man who holds you back
Who says you can’t
Who hugs you a little too long
Who comes home a little too late
Who drinks just a little too much
Who hits you a little too hard—
If this man is your father, husband, uncle, brother:
Is he still family?

Ruth took Naomi to be her mother, bringing her home to Bethlehem after their losses, saying, *Your people shall be mine; your God, my God*. Only in-laws: the widow returning, bitter. The young Moabite Ruth no better than a slave in that strange land, but going willingly.

In the matter of sowing and reaping, Ruth was repaid; Her kindnesses, noticed by God, were rewarded. Using the ancient laws, Boaz—her father-in-law’s kin—became kinsman-redeemer, binding them all in love and responsibility.

If the woman who gives up her home, her faith, who shows such acts of kindness that they are returned tenfold
Who embraces the truth without resistance
Who respects, obeys, fulfills—if this woman does all these things but has no obligation to you by blood:
Is she not family?

In the story, Naomi was blessed again, with a child of Ruth;
Boaz was admired for his sacrifice; and Ruth, beloved,
Created the families of Jesse, of David, of Christ.

Who is your family?
What is your law?

It could be said that Ruth adopted Naomi, learning that family is many things, and not always what you think.

On the cross, Christ said to Mary, *Woman, behold your son*,
And to John, *Behold your mother*. He gave each to the other. Adopted, they were bound.

Who is your family?

A gift, a choice...
Is deserved, is won...
Is granted, like grace...
Not always of lineage,
But always, of love.

IV

Where do we find these life-sustaining relationships? Some of us have found them in our own family of origins. Some in our families of choice. And some in our church family.

My prayer for each and all of us is that we may name and claim these relationships as sacred, and give thanks to God for the ways that we have experienced and can express God's sacred solidarity with and for each other. Amen.