

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17. The book of Ruth is strategic for many reasons, one of which is that it beautifully indicates how the elements of Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year were being observed in Israel one hundred years after its founding. That book revolves around this structure to periodically redistribute the wealth of Israel “so that there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). The Old Testament lesson for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time explored that reality at some length, and we would refer the reader to that commentary for a more thorough explanation of Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year and their relationship to the story of Ruth.

After Ruth pledges herself to the protection of Naomi in what is one of the most moving passages of devotion that appears in the Bible (Ruth 1:16-17), the two women return to Israel from Moab. Now a stranger in a strange land, Ruth sets about to gain for Naomi “redemption” of her husband’s “birthright” to the land given to his forefathers. How she does so is the subject of the Old Testament lesson for today.

We need to take a moment to examine both the concept and the practice of “redemption” in the book of Ruth, because it is that practice that tells us that at least this element of Jubilee was being actively practiced in pre-monarchial Israel. The book of Ruth is essentially about redemption. The words “redeem” (ga’al) and “redeemer” (go’el) is used 20 times in the 85 verses of the book of Ruth. The problem for the English reader, however, is that this usage both of this Hebrew word and concept is muddled because the word is often translated “act as next-of-kin” (cf. 3:13) and “nearest kin” (cf. 2:20), so that one is unaware that what one is reading is the word “redeem” or “redeemer”.

When we Christians hear the word “redemption”, we automatically think of the act of sacrifice by Jesus on the cross that brought about our salvation. But that is only an adaptation of the word. “Redeem” actually means “to buy back” or “to repossess”, and it is primarily and in its origins an economic term. It means to free one from a legal or financial obligation by a transaction or agreement that takes place. This is the way it is used in the Hebrew Bible. And this is what provides the indicator within the story of Ruth that Jubilee was being observed. What was occurring in the book of Ruth that economically and legally “redeemed” Naomi is not understandable without the understanding of this legal and economic usage.

As we pointed out in the Old Testament commentary for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, every Israelite family before the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE held a “birthright” of land. That is, when Israel left the wilderness after the Exodus and invaded Canaan, the captured land was divided between the twelve tribes. The land dedicated to a given tribe was then divided between that tribe’s clans, and the clans divided it by families. The land given to each family became their “birthright”, to be held in perpetuity; it was this parceled-out land that formed the foundation of Israelite economics (Joshua 13-21; Ezekiel 47:13-48:35; Lev. 25:25-34).

This “birthright” land could not be sold in perpetuity. If a family got into the kind of financial straits that required them to sell it in order to meet their debts, then it could be sold. But it had to be returned by the new owner on the Year of Jubilee to the original owner or his heir whose

birthright it was (Lev. 25:25-34, 47-55; Jer. 32:6-15). The Year of Jubilee occurred every 49 years – on the Sabbath year of the Sabbatical Years. Thus, Israel had built into its economy a means for redistributing wealth by eliminating the possibility of inheriting purchased wealth; that is, no rich person could accumulate land and pass it on to his heirs, who could then accumulate even more land (the foundation of wealth in Israel). No matter how much land you had accumulated over those 49 years, you had to surrender that land to the families who held that land as “birthright”. Thus, Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune in which society was rebalanced so that wealth couldn’t accumulate nor power accrue in the hands of a self-selected few.

But between Jubilees separated by 48 years, what would a person do if he had sold his land and paid his debt, and now wanted to buy back his birthright – yet still didn’t have the money to do so? He would go to his nearest kinsman, who would have the first option to buy it back. Such “buying back” would change the dynamics from the land being “owned” by an outsider to it being “held” by the kinsman, so that the birthright family could work that land as if it were their own (until Jubilee returned it fully to them once again). This kinsman was called the “kinsman redeemer,” because he restored to the land the family that had lost it through poverty, debt or violence. If the nearest kinsman refused to play the role of “redeemer”, the obligation would move to the second next-of-kin and so on through the extended family. This legislation thus allowed a restoration of the land before the Year of Jubilee, even in the face of continued economic hardship for the birthright family (Lev. 25:25-34, 47-55; Jer. 32:6-15). This is what the book of Ruth is about. Besides being a lovely story of both parental and conjugal love, the story of Ruth is particularly important because it demonstrates for a rather ordinary peasant family that the Jubilee stipulations for return of the land (wealth) to the birthright family was still being followed in Israel by 1100 to 1050 BCE!

Ruth’s offer to join Naomi in Israel opened up to the older woman the option of regaining her lost “birthright” land. If her daughter-in-law would marry a kinsman, that kinsman could act as “redeemer”, reclaim and pay for the repurchase of Naomi’s land and restore it to Naomi to provide her with financial security for the remainder of her life and for her heirs (the land would actually be absorbed into the estate of the kinsman-redeemer after her death, but it would provide financial security for the remainder of her life and, because of the marriage, security for all her heirs). That is what the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday’s lectionary is all about.

“Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband’s side, a prominent rich man of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi “Let me go to the field (of Boaz) and glean among the ears of grain.” Naomi said to her, “Go, my daughter.” So she went” (Ruth 2:1-3a).

Among the many stipulations of Israelite law designed to protect its poor (besides the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee), Israelite landowners were not to harvest the grain at the edges of the field nor to collect any grain that fell to the ground while being harvested. This was done in order to allow the poor and the resident aliens (who would own no land) to harvest and then use or sell grain (cf. Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19). Apparently, Boaz was scrupulous about following these regulations (which indicated that this kinsman was also an honorable man who

cared about the plight of the poor). So his fields were known as a prime harvesting source for the poor (Ruth apparently knew about it).

So Ruth goes to harvest grain. Boaz, who is unmarried, spots her. He doesn't know she is a kinswoman by marriage. But there must be something that attracts Boaz to Ruth, so that he instructs his servants to leave plenty of grain for her, and treats her with respect (2:5-16). Noting Boaz' attraction to Ruth, Naomi creates a plan to build a closer relationship between the two that would help solve her and Ruth's destitution. It is at this point that the lectionary passage begins.

Naomi instructs Ruth, "Wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor¹ (of Boaz); but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." Ruth said to Naomi, "All that you tell me I will do" (3:3-5).

We don't know what actually happened between Boaz and Ruth that night.² But the result of it was that Boaz made two decisions: to marry Ruth and to act as "kinsman redeemer" so that Naomi's property could be returned to her (and eventually added to Boaz' estate) and provide her and her heirs with financial security. But there was one obstacle in his plan; there was another kinsman who was a closer relative of Naomi's than was Boaz. So Boaz had to eliminate that relative's prior claim.

That was exactly what Boaz did (4:1-12), skillfully handling the situation so that the man relinquished his claim to redeem Naomi's land. Once the legalities took place, Boaz exercised his right to be kinsman redeemer, he paid for the land, it was returned to Naomi, and Boaz married Ruth (4:13-17). Ruth conceived and bore a son, Obed, who now became the one who would inherit Naomi's land and Boaz' land, and Naomi was protected for the remainder of her life. But more than that had occurred, the women of Bethlehem declared to Naomi. Redemption is more than retention of property, for the baby born to Ruth through Boaz will be "a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age" (4:15). For Naomi now lived out her name; though her life to that point had been full of sorrow, poverty and grief, she would now be "pleasant", for she

¹ A "threshing floor" was a cleared area where the harvest was crushed and winnowed in order to separate grain from chaff and straw. The stalks were first crushed, the straw was then separated by hand from the grain; the grain was then thrown into the air so that the wind would blow away the chaff; what remained was the good grain. The threshing floor was a communal setting where farmers would thresh and winnow their grain, would stay all night with their harvest until it had been thoroughly processed, and would therefore eat, drink and party with the other farmers who would be threshing their harvest, as well.

² Did Ruth and Boaz have sexual relations that night, or did they simply talk with each other? The text does not explicitly state the case either way. However, there are some tantalizing indicators. The Hebrew word translated "lie down" is used 8 times in 3:4-14, and is used in the Hebrew Bible both for the action of sleeping and for sexual intercourse (e.g., Gen. 19:33-35; 30:15-16; 38:26). The phrase "uncover his feet and lie down" (3:4) is a particularly tantalizing phrase, because "uncover" is used of sexual intercourse (Lev. 18:6-19) and "feet" was a common Hebrew euphemism for the genitals (Deut. 28:57; Isa. 7:20; Ezek. 16:25). To "know" or "make known" (3:3; 11, 14) is a Hebrew euphemism for sexual intercourse. Finally, the phrase "to spread your cloak over your servant" (3:9) has sexual overtones to it (Deut. 27:20; Ezek. 16:8). Whether or not Boaz and Ruth actually engaged in sexual activity, however, for a woman to come to a threshing floor (a traditional site for sex for hire – Hos. 9:1) and lying next to a sleeping man who was not her husband was scandalous conduct, requiring a response from him if he were to protect her honor and reputation.

now had a grandson to love, a daughter-in-law “who loves you more than seven sons” (4:15), and a kinsman-redeemer who has restored both justice and joy to her life. For the redemption Naomi has experienced will now become the redemption of the entire nation of Israel. Thus the story of Ruth ends, “Ruth, Boaz and Naomi named the child Obed; he became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, the king of Israel” (4:17)!³

Psalm 127 is essentially about keeping our priorities straight. The first portion of the psalm (vss. 1-2) speaks to all of God’s people of whatever generation. The second portion (vss. 3-5) is peculiar to a Mideastern culture.

The psalm begins, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil, for he provides for his beloved during sleep” (vss. 1-2).

Almost like wisdom literature or proverbs, this passage reminds us to keep our priorities straight. We will not be either secure or successful in our enterprises simply because of our hard work or unwavering efforts. It is not single-mindedness but whether God is truly in any action that determines whether or not it will be blessed. So it is a reminder to every one of God’s people that it is not so much that we need to ask God to bless our plans as it is that we seek to discern the plans of God and then join him in the acting out of those plans. Thus, we are not called to pray, “God bless us and our endeavors”. We are called to pray, “God, help us to discern your call and give us the determination to follow it!”

Whereas the first two verses of Psalm 127 speak to any believer in any generation, the final three verses of the psalm are peculiar to the Israelite and any eastern culture of its day. “Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (vss. 3-5).

As was demonstrated in the story of Ruth and the role of the “kinsman redeemer”, one who had no sons or whose sons were dead was essentially helpless. If Elimelech had had no brothers or cousins, there would have been no one to act as “kinsman redeemer” and therefore no way that Naomi would have regained Elimelech’s birthright of land. Therefore, having sons was an absolute economic necessity for any Israelite family, so that to have no sons was looked upon as a curse from God because the family was therefore economically helpless. That is what is being reflected in verses 3-5 of Psalm 127.

³ What was Ruth the Moabitess’ status in Israel, given the Deuteronomical stipulation, “No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live” (Deut. 23:3, 6)? Would this not mean that King David, only three generations removed from Ruth, not be shunned as a Moabite descendant? No. By her marriage to Boaz, Naomi’s “kinsman redeemer”, Ruth would no longer be considered a Moabitess, but rather a Jew by marriage! This, in turn, would make all her descendants Israelites.

That, of course, is no longer true. And that is why I say, in this commentary, that the first two verses of Psalm 127 are universal for all of the people of God of every generation, and verses 3-5 are peculiar to a Hebrew culture of the first millennium before the Common Era.

Mark 12:38-44 consists of two stories. The first is Jesus' denunciation of the scribes, criticizing them for ostentatious acts of piety ("walk around in long robes, be greeted with respect in the marketplace, say long prayers for sake of appearance") while secretly acting unjustly and oppressively ("devour widows' houses") (12:38-40).

The second story is Jesus' use of offerings in the temple to continue his attack against the religious leaders. Jesus observes that the rich are conspicuous in their placing of large sums of money in the coffers in the Temple. But a widow, embarrassed at the little she can offer, slips in only two copper coins. Jesus states to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty" (vv. 32-44).

This text is actually a part of a larger segment (Mark 12:35-44) in which Jesus condemns the dominant culture of Israel. He chooses the Temple as his symbol of that domination. It was created by God to be a house of prayer for all peoples. Instead, it has become the repository of the wealth and power of Israel, for its political and economic systems are under the control of the religious system of Israel. It has therefore surrendered its right to be the Godly center of Israel's life, and has become instead the symbol of the domination, oppression and exploitation of the people by Israel's most powerful representatives of the status quo. This larger segment (vs: 35-44) consists of three actions on Jesus' part that will, in turn, contribute to the likelihood of his being crucified.

First, Jesus debates the relationship of David to the Messiah (12:35-37) by using Psalm 110 in order to argue that Messiah is not to follow in the Davidic tradition of the legitimizing of the Davidic state (i.e., be "David's son") through Israel's current use of its priests, landowners and kings. Instead, Jesus is building an entirely different kind of kingdom centered on the liberation of the people, working for justice and equitable distribution of wealth and drawing all into dynamic relationship with God.

Second, Jesus intentionally polarizes the "rich scribes" and "poor widows" (12:41-44). The "rich scribes" are symptomatic of Israel's dominant culture manifested in their conspicuous consumption of wealth at the Temple. The "poor widows" are symptomatic of a suffering and crushed people who are forced to live in poverty, oppression and domination by the systems, and are embarrassed at the little they have to give. By contrasting scribe and widow, Jesus is expressing his disgust at the costs of a magnificent temple being built upon the exploitation of the poor (including getting them to give voluntarily from the little that they have – and then making them feel guilty about it).

Finally, Jesus directly attacks the leaders of Israel's religious, political and economic systems (12:38-40) who "devour widows' houses" in order that they may have "places of honor at banquets"! Ostentation and conspicuous consumption always accompanies the injustice

practiced by the rich and powerful. “Devouring widow’s houses” and holding “places of honor at banquets” always go together. It should be noted that Jesus’ accusation against the scribes of “devouring widows’ houses” is a particularly apt and powerful criticism. In Jesus’ day, it was considered improper for anyone to receive wages or even remuneration (e.g., a “tip”) for interpreting the Scriptures – the primary work of a scribe. Therefore, if the scribe was to make money – and Jesus describes these religious officials as “rich scribes” – the only way they could do so was to take advantage of the most vulnerable people in their society (“widows, orphans, the alien”) by manipulating the law to take away from them whatever little property they might have (“houses”). This is Jesus’ critique of Israel’s society – a critique both so “spot on” and so repulsive to the powers that they have no option but to get rid of him!

Hebrews 9:24-28. Whereas in the Mark passage for this Sunday, Jesus criticizes severely the dominant Temple culture, here in Hebrews the author contrasts that culture with the redemptive (see Ruth) work Christ has done as God’s selected high priest, building the Temple of the kingdom of God through his salvific work.

The author of Hebrews begins this portion of his epistle by contrasting Jesus to the high priest, making sacrifice on behalf of Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:32-33). He points out that the high priest had to repeat such atoning sacrifice each year on the Day of Atonement, year after year. That sacrifice, repeated “again and again”, required such repetition because it was not continually effective. The high priest, offering sacrifice on that day, needed atonement every bit as much as did the people. By definition, he had to sacrifice “blood that is not his own” because his blood wouldn’t atone. Therefore, that sacrifice was not permanently efficacious for either high priest or peasant (vss. 25-26).

But Jesus’ sacrifice was entirely different. It was a sacrifice that was from “the foundation of the world” to the very “end of the age” (i.e., the end of time). It was efficacious for all who embraced it and for all time and eternity. Therefore, Jesus’ death was a sufficient sacrifice – not a *Day* of Atonement, but an atonement for all time and for all who are chosen (vss. 27-28).

The author of Hebrews then summarizes his case by referring directly to Isaiah 53:12: “Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Jesus is the authentic high priest of the authentic Temple of the kingdom of God whose whole life was atonement, playing the role of “kinsman redeemer” to pay the debt of our sin against God, pouring out himself to death and thus providing for our atonement, so that now he can “save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (vs. 28).

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle B Ordinary Time 32.doc)