

“Women on the Edge”

Ruth 3:1-5, Mark 12:41-44

Rev. Rob MacDougall

11/8/09

As I read our two readings from the Bible for this morning, a quote from William Sloan Coffin came to mind. Coffin was commenting on a relational and theological dynamic between many Christians and God. He said: “Too many Christians seek an all powerful God so that we can be content being weak, but Jesus came as a weak and vulnerable baby so that we might become strong.”

I was amazed when I first read Coffin’s words. It was a stunning insight and challenge to so much of what I understood about being a follower of Jesus’ teachings and being part of the Christian faith.

I have read the Christmas story hundreds of times and have understood the vulnerability of the manger, but somehow through my years in the church what I have heard about how God views us, is that we are fallen, inadequate, weak, incapable and untrustworthy.

The Apostle Paul exhorts us not to trust in people who will always disappoint us, and to only trust God. And Paul isn’t the only one to point out our human imperfections, from the story of Adam and Eve on we are regularly confronted with stories of how we lose our way.

Even more than the Bible, the church over the centuries has brow beaten people about our wretchedness, not so much to help us move into a better way of living and treating each other, but to make us beholden to “benevolent” religious bodies and leaders.

But the church and those who emphasize portions of scripture that keep us continually thinking about our weaknesses are only able to haunt us when we become comfortable with giving over responsibility for our lives and world. There develops, it seems, a complimentary relationship between what people of the Christian faith teach and our human leaning to think of ourselves as powerless. If we believe we are indeed powerless then we will not be responsible for the shape of our personal lives or the shape of the world. In its own peculiar way, Christian teachings about human sinfulness make living easy. As William Sloan Coffin wrote: “we want God to be strong so we can be weak, but God comes as a weak and vulnerable baby so that we might become strong.”

The reason why Coffin’s words came to mind is because I wondered why the book of Ruth was included in the Bible. There is almost no mention of God in the book. There are no prayers and there are no miracles, and the only mention in the book about Hebrew people comes at the very end when it says that Ruth’s son Obed is the father of Jesse who is the father of King David. For the most part there seems to be very little purpose in telling the

story of Ruth and Naomi – the lineage of David could have been on a list inserted anywhere in one of the history books without this story. The only real reason for the book that I can think is that this story became very important for a portion of the Hebrew people. The story must have revealed a vital element of the Hebrew spirit for people of common origins. It is not a story of wealth, military might or even God’s miraculous interventions – it is a story of human devotion, resourcefulness and acting not as a victim, but as a capable member of God’s people.

Naomi rhetorically asks Ruth: “Should I not try to find you a home where you will be well provided for?”

This question and the women’s response is at the very heart of what the entire book of Ruth offers to all who read it. Here are two women who have suffered great losses in life and have been reduced to gleaning from farmers’ harvested fields to get food to eat. With few tangible resources Naomi says to Ruth, “should I not try?” The question itself is a refusal of victimhood, it is a denial of people’s judgments, it is an expression of faith, hope and possible change.

The story of Naomi and Ruth expresses a dimension of Hebrew faith that does not wait passively for God and others for rescue, but instead seizes the possibilities that are close at hand.

The gospel story of the widow’s mite echoes this same spiritual teaching. In all its brevity, Mark records how Jesus tells his disciples that the two copper coins the widow put in the temple treasury are worth more than the gifts given by the wealthy. She gave all she had while they gave out of their comfort.

This isn’t for the most part, a story of condemnation toward wealthy people and what they do or don’t give, it’s really a story about a woman on the edge refusing to be helpless, refusing to believe she has nothing to offer. Jesus’ point is to focus on the widow’s faith when most people would focus on the gifts of the wealthy. Jesus is teaching the disciples about honoring the strength of vulnerable people. Jesus is teaching the disciples to see courage where others see tragedy and deficiency. Instead of proclaiming that the widow’s situation is due to her sinfulness, Jesus lifts up the widow as a model of faith.

Jesus was always doing this with the people he encountered – he was always finding strength where others saw weakness, he was finding faith where others saw sin, he saw hope where others saw the destitute, he saw value where others saw poverty.

A litany from the Iona community puts it like this: “Glorious God... you look at the ugliest soul and see, still unstirred, the wings of an angel... You see our lives in the context of eternity and make time for waiting, for yearning, for putting all things in proportion.”

When I read the biblical stories of what God in Christ seeks, I feel energy enter my body and spirit. When I pray the litany from Iona I feel my heart being reoriented, my vision changing focus, my mind's neurons starting to fire. While it may be comfortable to feel helpless, it also feels lifeless. Naomi's words, "Should I not try?" are much more engaging than crying "Why me" for too long. Jesus came to lift us up, lift our burdens, free us from all that strips life of its abundant gifts.

When I write my sermons I am aware that a good inspiring story to illustrate my point is very helpful, it provides a moment for those of you who haven't gotten my point(s) with an opportunity to say: "oh, now he is making sense." When I was thinking about good illustrations of people who were saying like Naomi, "I should at least try," there were a flood of images that came to mind, so I decided to offer a list, if you will, of those who, even for a moment were living like the widow bringing her copper coins forward:

Glenda Jones told me her story about adopting her son Mason as she celebrated having all the legal proceedings culmination.

Phil and Josh Steans helped Erik Steans, Phil's son, walk down the aisle at Molly Steans' wedding last month. Erik suffered a burst aneurism and most doctors predicted that he would never walk again.

Nicole Cervenka, seemingly out of the blue decided that she wanted to help people get warm clothing for the winter. She invited us all to donate sweaters, hats, coats, scarves, and more. We filled four clothing racks and three tables full of items, 2/3 of which was distributed one Thursday night.

Ruth Thomas' husband, Chuck, lives at the Care Partners assisted living facility. There aren't many planned activities there so for the past year or two Ruth has organized weekly worship services. Ruth always says I can't sing well but I can recruit people.

Wally Smetana, a long time member of the Menomonie community died recently. Wally wrote a long history page in the Dunn County News after retiring as the News' editor. Wally also served on the Dunn County Board for years – even though he was in his eighties and wanted to get off the board because nobody from his district would run, Wally continued because he thought it important.

Last week the families with young children met on Wednesday night. Emalee Sparks, a Stout student who has been helping with our kids program for two years, had the kids draw pictures of what they thought heaven was like. The kids told the adults about their pictures and then Emalee asked them to say one thing they learned about heaven – they said heaven is "a good place, everyone is welcome, and you'll

see people you love there.” I think Emalee taught the kids more about heaven and hope in a half hour than our greatest theologians will teach them in a lifetime.

We are called to say with Naomi, “shouldn’t I try?” and to bring our coins, few or many, forward. We are called to embrace the spiritual reality that God came to us weak and vulnerable that we might become strong even in our poverty. Let us breathe this reality in and when we go forth from this place live as empowered people of God.