

THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST

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(Ruth and Naomi: Now and Beyond Stewardship)

I used to have a coffee mug with a bright red, hand drawn 5-point star on it that said "Stewardship is the main work of the Church." Then it listed 5 essentials of Christian work, like being stewards of the Gospel, of finances, of each other, you know. I always thought it kind of overloaded the word Steward; and the Great Commission people were sure not happy about the motto. But it made its point. You know, Stewardship Program themes come and go; this one went when I noticed the upside down mug drying on the counter, and the image of the upside down 5-point star suddenly made me realize that all images are not created equal. That was the end of the mug. Apparently I wasn't alone- the image seems to have vanished everywhere; marketing doesn't always work. In any case, we're going to look to the Old Testament story of Ruth and Naomi today and find essentials of stewardship, both immediate and beyond.

Lord, let thy word only be spoken, and thy word only be heard. Amen.

Stewardship is about stewards; and the word stewardship helps us define good stewards. Essentially, it is a word describing the good care and use of material things; like your money, or the steward of someone else's money and properties. But it doesn't take long to expand the material aspect into other obvious areas of care and use.

- Yes, there is the Stewardship of money, setting your priorities based on understanding, duty and gratitude. However, we can expand by identifying:
- Stewardship of relationship, lives in loyalty and devotion one to another;
- Stewardship of gratitude and praise, both with each other and to God;
- Stewardship of the Good News of Jesus, found as a charge at the end or toward the end of every Gospel; familiar best from Matthew, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations;" which means to share it with others, not keep it to yourself.
- And included in our baptismal vows is the stewardship of Creation; making sure that we pass on something worthwhile to the next generation.

In all of it, there is this teaching of care, wisdom, faith, sharing, not being naïve, counting the cost, and, in terms of what God has given us especially, there is making sure our stewardship includes a return to God for what he has provided to us. As well, there is a truth found in scripture that includes being blessed for your giving, and for your invested stewardship in everything.

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Melvina Reynolds, way back when, wrote a song, sometimes called the Magic Penny. It's a simple folk-style song, and it was one of the first songs I learned how to play on the guitar back when I was in 7th grade. It has stuck with me since, once I got past the magic reference:

Love is something if you give it away, you'll end up having more./
It's just like a magic penny, hold it tight and you won't have any/
Lend it, spend it, and you'll have so many they'll roll all over the floor./
So, love is something if you give it away, you'll end up having more.

We often sell stewardship, at the pledge card time of the year, just like that, as something that works for you, now and then. Stewardship is much more encompassing, however. As we noted a few weeks ago how many times money or mammon or material goods are mentioned in the bible, Scripture encourages very strongly the behavior of recognizing that what we see in our hands, as that which God has given to us, and the necessary response of relationship to be grateful, and even return to the Lord a portion. If you are a servant of the Lord, as we heard last week, then you are called to be a good steward anyway, even if your pennies don't start rolling all over the floor. So we hear that stewardship of God has given us is in the categories of : The duty of giving. The cheerful giver. The thankful returner. AND what happens beyond what we can see ourselves doing as stewards right now.

We can see this in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Granted, the larger story has twists and turns, and some unfamiliar practices and behaviors regarding men and women, even courting, and the redemption of family land. I'm going to presume your familiarity with the whole story since we only heard a small portion of it. But bear with me; and go home today and read the whole thing (in about 10 minutes).

But let's start with what was read today from chapter 1. There's a husband and wife, who are from Bethlehem, and who raise two boys. They have to move to Moab. This is a Jewish family that only came to that rather unfriendly part of the world due to the drought, or so they think. The story introduces two local Moabite girls, who would not have come to know the two displaced Jewish boys except for the marriage of the parents elsewhere, right? The story already begins to exude stewardship of gratitude and appreciation, doesn't it. And then joy comes to the story in the marriage of the local girls to the transplanted boys, creating a burgeoning extended family. Life is good; bonds are being established. But tragedy hits this group three times, the death of each of the husbands. So now there are three widows; not a good situation in any culture, but especially then. But the stewardship of relationship meant that they stick together. Then, with news of healthy agriculture back in Judah, the Jewish mother, Naomi, decides it's time to go back, and there arises the test of this very stewardship of loyalties in relationship. One daughter-in-law is convinced by the mother-in-law to stay with her own family, the Moabite family she left to marry the Jewish boy. It makes some sense;

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perhaps the venture to a new place - just like Naomi and her husband did years before - is simply too much to bear, especially if there is no overwhelming need, such as a famine or drought.

But Ruth, who had also been exhorted to stay, decides that the stewardship of this relationship demands the stewardship action of a portion of return: "your people have become my people, and your God my God. I will serve him with you." This works itself out to mean returning a portion of the gift of the son given by her mother-in-law by sticking with her, being her companion. She will most likely have her own life down the road, but at this moment her tithe is her willingness to accompany, to mutual caring and nurture, which in terms of benefits will benefit both her and her mother-in-law. And Naomi, for all her exhorting, is grateful in return.

This is good stewardship, the mutual caring for that which has been placed into our hands, in this case, a mutual return for so much given. For Ruth, an obvious devotional act in return for that which Naomi (and her deceased husband) had brought into Ruth's world - a husband, and it would seem, a caring, loving family.

We can make this connection to the act of stewardship with our material goods, specifically money, as we present the traveling needs of the Church community, our congregation of All Saints', and the body of Christ at large. We ask the type of question that it sounds to me like Ruth asked about Naomi, "What has God done for us?" And the answer can also be answered in terms of relationship: God has done everything through the willingness to love us and show mercy to us ever since Adam and Eve, through Abraham, through Moses, and through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The seemingly obvious thing for us, is like Ruth, to say to our Father in heaven, "I'm with you." In terms of finances, the return of the money we have as pledge and various offerings of charity and kindness becomes the sign of Ruth to Naomi to say not only, I'm with you, but also to literally make her life with her in Naomi's homeland, just as we might see our pledge and offerings being the giving of our provision life blood to Christ through the Church, our homeland.

Now, we could stop there for this story to be important for how we pray and reflect and then decide to give financially. But with an even closer look into the larger story of the book of Ruth, that part we didn't have read today, we find there is an aspect of this stewardship tale of love and devotion that is virtually unseen. I'm hoping you recall that Ruth marries a man back in Bethlehem area. As far as the lesson today is concerned, you could say it's the "to be continued" part, like we would get to it next week; but we're just not going to wait. It's the introduction of Boaz, who is an extended family member of Naomi, who is to become the widow Ruth's new redeemer husband. You might say that it is the story that is beyond the immediate story, but intimately connected to it, even organically.

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Ruth and Naomi, and Boaz, stewardship all around, have no idea what would be the ramifications of the marriage that takes place between Boaz and Ruth, generations and generations after either one of them would die. It is the ramification of a relationship that would never have happened on its own.

What kind of stewardship is this??

It's the kind where God makes use of every action of stewardship on our part to forward his kingdom. It's the reality of stewardship that happens after the usual acts of stewardship for any given season in the present. This is the BEYOND part of what you might call Immediate Stewardship Just like a prophesy which can have its immediate fulfillment, and can contain in the same prophecy a revelation or word that will not come true for hundreds of years. In other words, your action of immediate stewardship has a component of being helpful and useful, by God's design, way down the road, and you may never know it.

Let me say it yet another way.

Your stewardship Now has Implications for both now and the unseen Future.

Your act of devotion now is liable to be incredibly important for someone that you've never met and never will.

So here is the Beyond Stewardship story for Ruth and Naomi:

Ruth and Boaz get married, providing the reclaiming of the abandoned family property of Naomi's deceased husband. Boaz redeems it.

Ruth and Boaz give birth to a child by the name of Obed (who today would ever name their baby Obed?!...nonetheless....). Obed and his wife give birth to a child they name Jesse. Jesse and his wife give birth to at least seven sons, and one of them, the youngest, is discerned by the great prophet Samuel to be the next King of Israel, after Saul's failing. This young man's name was David. King David to be. And in the lineage of David and the promise of God for a never ending kingdom, is Mary. And through Mary and the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, by God the Father's intention, the Word of God is born into our world as the savior of all. And his name shall be Jesus.

Ruth, Naomi nor Boaz could not have known that. And even if she did know that, that's not why she agreed to Naomi's encouragement to make herself available for marriage to Boaz. She did that for the immediate reasons of good Stewardship of her relationship with Naomi. And – more important to our contemporary culture – it didn't hurt that Ruth thought Boaz was quite a hunk of a man and fell in love at first sight! You and I can't possibly know the Beyond implications of our daily and immediate acts of good Stewardship for the Kingdom of God and for each other.

But from this story of Ruth and Naomi, with its stewardship implications, you now see that stewardship is more than the immediate value of what you place from your pocket

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of life into the offering plate, or mailed in, or automatically withdrawn. God will take what you give in return and use it for his purposes, in his way, and in his timing. Now or Immediate stewardship, and the Beyond, speaks so much more of the relationship that God wants to have even more deeply with you as you give now.

Finally, there is one thing that connects every action of Stewardship to make it good and holy. Whether it is your immediate financial giving by pledge or placing money in the offering plate, or whether you see that action as the Beyond facet; whether it is money, or nurturing, or evangelism with the good news,; whether it is your stewardship of praise, or thanksgiving, or gratitude; whether it is your stewardship of relationship or legacy, the gifts that God has given for you to use in ministry, as you do what you do all for the glory of God, your act of good stewardship allows God to place His hand on it, and upon you. There are too many verses that say exactly that, although the blessing is not always spelled out what it might be. But every bit of immediate stewardship or Beyond stewardship is recognized by God and He blesses that action, he blesses your being a good steward, and He blesses you.

May your stewardship and beyond stewardship lead you out of the lands of drought and famine, and into the promised land of fullness and delight in the Lord and in His creation.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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