



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Two Tales of Extravagance

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 11, 2012

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17 and Mark 12:38-44

I don't know if you have heard: we had a national election last week. Most people were not neutral, which is to say at the end of it all a little more than half the population was thrilled and a little less than half was far from it.

The news of how deep Sandy's devastation really is got worse and worse as the week went on even as thousands of people joined in a variety of ways to help and as many more thousands, millions in fact, got on with life as is the inevitable case at such times.

Today is Veterans' Day, a day which always resonates with me, a non-veteran, as so many in my generation are, a complicated resonance in fact. I am deep into Kevin Powers' amazing novel, *The Yellow Birds*, a story about the war in Iraq, how its grip on veterans never really goes away no matter how far they are from the battlefield. Even when I am not reading, it is difficult to get Privates Bartle and Murphy, the novel's protagonists, off my mind, knowing the outcome but wondering what truly constitutes survival. I ponder that particularly as I remember with a heavy heart reading that 18 veterans in the U.S. commit suicide every day. Veterans' Day, a day to honor and ponder and pray for a time when there is no war.

But I am also thinking of the children we shall baptize in a few minutes, of the wedding held here last night, both events deep nods to the hope and promise of newness of life, of new beginnings filled with so much joy.

And I am thinking about our ancient scripture, like the two old stories we have heard this morning, and wondering if and how such stories as these still speak to us today. After spending a week with them, I am happy they still do for me and, I hope, for you. The first is an ancient story of an unlikely but deeply loving relationship, a love story, in a way, between an older woman and her daughter-in-law. As the story begins, each has recently become a widow, a position without standing in their society, the immediate assurance of dire straits to follow. What stands out, though, in this story is the depth of their love, not the tragedy of their circumstances. Ruth refuses to allow Naomi, her mother-in-law, to go without her and says (or surely she must have sung—having heard it sung a million times as we have), *Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.* This is not the mother-in-law to daughter-in-law relationship of modern sitcoms; thank God for another view.

And so they return together to Naomi's homeland, a place near Bethlehem—Naomi and Ruth, her Gentile daughter-in-law. Using both a version of the levirate marriage system (whereby the brother or some other close relative of the widow's husband marries her) and the seductive power of a young woman, Ruth, at Naomi's instigation, is married to the financially secure Boaz. Much about the story unsettles our feminist hearing, as it should; and though this story has a happy ending, it might just as well have not. The disregard in that part of the world, then and now—indeed the disregard of women in our lives and in our church even today—could be the substance of today's sermon.

But that is not my sermon, not for today anyway. It is not, because to make that the point of the story is to diminish the fact that both Naomi and Ruth are strong women with immense personal power, power used to the advantage of their love for one another, indeed for their literal survival. The structures of their world at every turn were against

them, but their immense love overcame the obstacles.

Their unlikely love is the teaching point for me today. I expect they were surprised by how deeply they cared for one another, so extraordinary it was. But unusual or not, they claimed it with all their might, and so must we when we encounter such love in likely or unlikely places. We have more agency about love and love relationships than we often believe ourselves to have. While it is too simplistic to say that we must be open to love before love finds us, in some approximate way, that claim is true. We *choose* to love freely or not; and sometimes though we desire love more than anything in the world, our fears, our boundaries, our misgivings keep us from the very thing we so desperately want. Love is never risk-free, and anyone who says it is is at least foolish and maybe mean. Ruth made the choice to honor love when it arrived and to state her love for her mother-in-law, of all people, one to whom she wished to connect herself forever. And the love was returned with devotion and action.

We also make choices about acting lovingly; we decide a hundred—maybe hundreds—of times each day whether or not to respond with love. In working with couples who are about to get married, one of the few pieces of advice I give is that they be devoted to one principle: believe the best of one another first and stick to that belief until there is incontrovertible evidence to the contrary. If necessary, there will be plenty of time to conclude that the other is a total jerk; but I guarantee them, if they start with that presumption each time there is an argument, before long it will be the dominant position. Little decisions over long periods of time not to act lovingly erode even the best relationships, and that does not have to happen. And when we do it, we need to quickly say and mean, “I’m so sorry.”

In the second story we meet another extraordinary woman, another widow, who loved in a different way. Far from being the pathetic weak soul we often imagine her, she gave so much because she wanted to and because she loved God. Her powerful witness touched Jesus. There are only four other moments in the gospel when Jesus called all the disciples together to show them something. “Look,” he said, “at this woman and learn from her.” Her presence was particularly moving when viewed alongside her male counterparts, the religious leaders. The gospel says that they liked “to walk around in long robes, to sit in the best places,” and so forth. I seriously considered wearing a slightly different outfit for today. We also read that these religious elite “devoured widows’ houses,” which means they readily accepted the hospitality of widows and then, as if that were not outrageous enough, pontificated mercilessly in long prayers. How utterly tedious—and sadly trend-setting for religious leaders throughout history.

There is no indication that the widow with the mite cared what anyone else thought or that she had a sense of her action as unusual. Although others said it of her, she never said that she was giving out of her poverty; my sense is that she gave from abundance, from immense abundance, of which the rich folks knew very little. My fantasy is that she danced as she brought her gift to the altar rather than with grimaced resolve. This story is often used as a stewardship teaching; if you need some nudging in that direction, by all means please be so nudged. But this is less a story about giving than living. This simple woman gave because giving was for her to love and to live; it was a means of grace for her as indeed it is for us all.

And so at the end of the day we are left with elections and tragedies, with babies and marriages, and with all sorts of conditions in between. God, as I understand God, is the loving glue that holds us all together in the good times and the bad. With all my heart I believe that the Christ of our faith calls us to love and to give daringly and extravagantly—and that when we do, we will meet again the Christ within us and the Christ in others.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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