

## Sacrifice

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, November 8, 2009)

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 (The Message) <sup>1</sup>One day her mother-in-law Naomi said to Ruth, “My dear daughter, isn’t it about time I arranged a good home for you so you can have a happy life? <sup>2</sup>And isn’t Boaz our close relative, the one with whose young women you’ve been working? Maybe it’s time to make our move. Tonight is the night of Boaz’s barley harvest at the threshing floor.

<sup>3</sup>“Take a bath. Put on some perfume. Get all dressed up and go to the threshing floor. But don’t let him know you’re there until the party is well under way and he’s had plenty of food and drink. <sup>4</sup>When you see him slipping off to sleep, watch where he lies down and then go there. Lie at his feet to let him know that you are available to him for marriage. Then wait and see what he says. He’ll tell you what to do.”

<sup>13</sup>Boaz married Ruth. She became his wife. Boaz slept with her. By GOD’s gracious gift she conceived and had a son. <sup>14</sup>The town women said to Naomi, “Blessed be GOD! He didn’t leave you without family to carry on your life. May this baby grow up to be famous in Israel! <sup>15</sup>He’ll make you young again! He’ll take care of you in old age. And this daughter-in-law who has brought him into the world and loves you so much, why, she’s worth more to you than seven sons!”

<sup>16</sup>Naomi took the baby and held him in her arms, cuddling him, cooing over him, waiting on him hand and foot. <sup>17</sup>The neighborhood women started calling him “Naomi’s baby boy!” But his real name was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

Mark 12:38-44 (The Message) <sup>38</sup>He continued teaching. “Watch out for the religion scholars. They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, <sup>39</sup>basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. <sup>40</sup>And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they’ll pay for it in the end.”

<sup>41</sup>Sitting across from the offering box, he was observing how the crowd tossed money in for the collection. Many of the rich were making large contributions. <sup>42</sup>One poor widow came up and put in two small coins—a measly two cents. <sup>43</sup>Jesus called his disciples over and said, “The truth is that this poor widow gave more to the collection than all the others put together. <sup>44</sup>All the others gave what they’ll never miss; she gave extravagantly what she couldn’t afford—she gave her all.”

On the way home from church one Sunday, a little boy announced to his parents: “When I grow up, I’m going to be a minister of a church.”

“That sounds nice,” his parents said, “but what made you decide that?”

“Well,” the little boy said, “I’ll have to go to church every Sunday anyway, and I just think it will be more fun to stand up and yell than sit there and be yelled at.”

Of course, it isn’t that simple, especially in the United Church of Christ. A person who wants to be a minister must have a genuine sense of call, and must love people and have a gift for working well with people. John says it so well in his first letter, 4:20: “...those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” And then there is the sacrifice of ministry. First, there are years of education. If a person spent as much time studying medicine or law as you need to spend studying to become a minister, you could become a doctor or lawyer instead. And speaking of sacrifice, those doctors and lawyers usually earn much more than a minister, which we could consider another sacrifice.

But on the other hand, sacrifice is necessary in almost any area of accomplishment. Consider the athlete, whose slogan often is, “No pain, no gain.” You need to spend time and exert a lot of effort to build the strength and stamina required for almost any kind of sport. Or how many of you have gone through illness or surgery, followed by hours of grueling therapy. You know all too well that if you do not sacrifice time for your therapy, sometimes quite painfully, you may never fully recover. Even in the business world, how often are the new graduates told they must “pay the price” by working in the lesser jobs, working their way up the ladder?

Or talk to my daughter about the importance of sacrifice in the military. You carry out orders, sometimes at all hours of the day, knowing that you will not advance without it, or you might not even get that weekend pass without obedience and sacrifice. And sometimes, in war time especially, you may be called on to make the ultimate sacrifice, giving up your very life to protect others from those who seek to do us harm. We recognize

and appreciate the sacrifice that so many have made to defend our nation, which is why we observe holidays such as Veterans Day, this coming Wednesday.

However, I have heard it said that much of the sacrifice we talk about in the world today is really sacrifice that we hope will eventually lead to personal gain. The person going through therapy endures the hours of effort and pain, so that they can walk again, or regain whatever bodily functions have been lost due to illness. The athletes endure extensive training so that they can become accomplished in their sport. The junior executive may sacrifice and endure years in menial, unchallenging positions, in order to achieve promotions and greater responsibility. Even the student is willing to sacrifice years of gainful employment, not to mention late hours studying, in order to gain the education necessary for a higher paying job, or at least the satisfaction of being able to work in their chosen profession.

I don't think Ruth could see much hope for personal gain when she made the sacrifice to leave her homeland and stay with Naomi as she returned to her home. At that time, in that culture, the options were limited. Naomi spelled them out to her two daughters-in-law. Women were completely dependent on the men in their family to care for them. Naomi had lost her husband and her two sons – there were no men left in her family. She thought that her only hope would be to return to her homeland, where she might at least have a chance to get some minimal care as a widow. She told Ruth and Orpah to go back to their families. They were still young, they might attract another husband, who could care for them, and in time, perhaps, produce families of their own. But Ruth would have none of it. She was ready to sacrifice whatever chances she might have had back with her family, just to stay with Naomi and continue being family to her. That is the kind of sacrifice that our culture doesn't understand too well: to give something up, not to gain a better future, but perhaps to have no future, just to stay with a loved one.

We heard the end of that story. It all worked out very well for Ruth, and we presume Naomi, as Ruth did get married, and had a son, who had a son, until an offspring became the greatest king to ever reign in Israel, and then another son, who brought salvation to all humanity. It was God's plan, even when it didn't seem to make much sense here, but it required obedience, and sacrifice, with no apparent personal gain in the outcome.

We see another sacrifice in the Gospel lesson. I think every Christian is familiar with the story of the widow's two coins. But isn't the context interesting? Our lesson starts with Jesus criticizing the scribes, who walk around in long robes. I just couldn't bring myself to put my robe on this morning and read that lesson for Scripture. But what is the point of Jesus' criticism? The scribes were making a show of their religion. They wanted to be shown respect, given places of honor, held in esteem by the public. There wasn't much of a sacrifice in what they were doing. Even in the second part of the lesson, as the rich people gave their offering, there was no sign of humility, or grateful giving of their offering, and certainly no sacrifice. In contrast, the little that the widow gave was at great sacrifice.

Now don't be distracted by the fact that the story is about giving your offering. Jesus isn't commending those who gave large offerings, but he is holding up the example of the widow, because she made a sacrifice to come to the temple and worship God. Have you made a sacrifice to be in God's house or worship God? For most of us it has just been the sacrifice of an extra hour of sleep, or an extra cup of coffee, or a couple of hours on a Sunday morning – and let's hope the service doesn't run late, we can only sacrifice our time up until 11:45, or maybe 11:50 at the most. I know, a lot of people don't even sacrifice this much time to be in God's house. But can you do more? Can you get involved in one of the special groups here at the church, such as the men's fellowship, or the choir, or Social Concerns Committee? Can you sacrifice some of your personal time, to be with a grieving friend, or a lonely neighbor?

Sacrifice is such an essential part of the Christian Faith. Look at the tremendous sacrifice made by God, giving his own Son to come and dwell among us. Look at the sacrifice of our Savior Jesus Christ, giving up his life on the cross, not for any hope of any kind of personal gain whatsoever, but for our benefit, for our gain.

What have you sacrificed in turn?

Could you spare a few more coins?

Or a few more hours?

Or a little more love and compassion for others?