

If television producer and actress Roma Downey, of *Touched by an Angel* fame were to make a made for television movie of the Book of Ruth, there would have to be an opening disclaimer of TV-MA - or mature audiences only. It's a little shocking that we would have a reading that discloses such personal intimacy between a man and a woman, especially in church! And while it isn't expected, and after the initial shock wears off, isn't it a comfort to know that even in such a private, vulnerable moment God is present and delights in our delight.

Let me remind you of the story in Ruth. Once upon a time, there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem, which is ironic as Bethlehem means "house of bread." To escape the famine, a devout Jewish family: Elimelech and his wife Naomi moved to Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, where they were able to survive. For awhile, they thrived. Then Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow. The boys grew to manhood, and married local girls, even though they weren't Jewish. Both sons also died and left their wives childless. In ancient Israel, this was a calamity of the first order - to be without the protection and provision of a man was to be utterly vulnerable. To be without children was to be without a future. Naomi, whose name means "pleasant" despaired and she decided to return

to her homeland. She advised her friends to no longer call her “pleasant” but “bitter” because of the hardships that had befallen her.

Her daughters-in-law were devoted to her, and she urged them to return to their people and the protection of their family of origin. Orpah reluctantly complied with her mother-in-law’s wish, but Ruth was adamant, wherever Naomi went, Ruth would go, who ever Naomi worshiped, Ruth would worship. So Ruth and Naomi travelled together back to Bethlehem.

A consistent theme in the Hebrew Scripture is that God expects his creation to take care of the widow, the orphan and the resident alien. One of the ways that the ancient Jews did this was to allow the least of their brothers and sisters to glean from the fields, to deliberately leave leftovers from the harvest lying in the fields. Naomi was certainly a widow and Ruth was both a widow AND a resident alien.

Her devotion to Naomi was well known, and the first field they chanced upon was owned by a fellow called Boaz, who happened to be a relative of Elimelech, and thus in line to be a potential husband for Ruth. Naomi was in no shape to do the actual gleaning so Ruth did it for both of them, with great success. Boaz happened to notice Ruth, and ordered his

men to leave more than usual for her to glean. He also ordered them to leave her alone and keep her safe.

Naomi when she heard about Boaz's kindness, was absolutely thrilled. This man was doing more for them than was absolutely required, and even if he had done just what was required, he'd be doing more than most people. So Naomi counsels Ruth to make herself as pretty as possible, put on her best dress, and under cover of darkness, when no one can see her, go to Boaz. Imagine Boaz's surprise when he awakes from his sleep because the blanket has been removed and he finds Ruth there! He's deeply touched that the young woman would seek his protection and finds him attractive enough to offer herself wholeheartedly to him. And Boaz offers Ruth his protection, even devising a way to make sure he could marry her.

And as we heard, Ruth becomes pregnant, Ruth and Boaz become parents, and Naomi becomes a grandmother. And the child, Obed - the restorer of life - becomes the grandfather of David! The future of Ruth and Naomi, as well as all of Israel has been secured! It's a happy ending with a moral.

While I didn't explicitly mention God, and God hardly makes an appearance within the story, Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all act in a manner consistent with God's great love for us. From the beginning, God obligated himself to us, and obligates us to him. We haven't done so well with our part, but God has always been consistent with us. Ruth and Naomi were consistent in their love and concern for each other, and Boaz shows a love born of obligation to both his God and to these near strangers to him. Between the three of them, they live into loyalty and trust, of connection and interdependence. It is an active love of God and love of neighbor. And they were blessed with a child. Where was God when Naomi despaired? He was always present and active in her life. Where was God when Ruth approached Boaz on the threshing floor? He was there too. God is present and active in our lives, even in the most ordinary and mundane of moments. Indeed, these ordinary moments are the stuff in which our relationships are made and strengthened or weakened. Our Biblical witness is that God has a consistent habit of welcoming the stranger, of broadening the circle of "his chosen people" wider and wider, and he sets the bar high for human encounters with the other. God expects graciousness and charity, and when these happen, we can ultimately see

God bringing blessings to us, despite loss and trouble, displacement and pain. God may be unseen in these moments, but God is never absent.

Perhaps this is why Jesus evaluates the religious leaders of his day and finds them wanting. The scribes of Jesus time would be the equivalent of double degree holders and performing dual job functions in our own day: they were equivalent of accountants AND attorneys. They were thoroughly familiar with the requirements of the law and the inner workings of finance. They worked hard to attain their positions, and like some people, succumbed to feeling proud of their accomplishments and feeling superior to others. They came to expect the best seat in the public square and in the house of worship. They came to expect the financial support of their fellow Jews as only their due. They came to believe that wealth and comfort was their birthright. And some ignored or came to overlook the plight of the widow, orphan and resident alien. Jesus holds them accountable; they should know better and act accordingly.

Jesus observes the widow giving of herself wholeheartedly to the Temple. She is not expected nor required to give of her meager resources, yet she does. Like Boaz in the story of Ruth, she does more than she is required to do. She does this despite some of the scribes. Her faith in God

and her trust in an imperfect institution leads her to do so. Within the Gospel of Mark, she also foreshadows what is about to happen to Jesus. Jesus, too, will give of himself wholeheartedly. He will do more than is required. He will submit to a grave injustice, to a deeply flawed human system. The people who contribute to this system can be considered unworthy of Jesus' wholehearted embrace. Yet that's part of the point, isn't it? We are all unworthy, we all fall short, we all contribute to systems that oppress and distort. God's loving embrace and redemptive salvation is not based upon merit or worth.

This doesn't let us off the hook, though. We cannot and should not perpetuate patterns of behavior that elevate some at the expense of another. To demonstrate love of God and love of neighbor, we are to become aware of those things that oppress and separate. Last Sunday's *Washington Post* contains a couple of examples of such an awareness (and I use these as examples, not as directives) and the actions that result from such awareness: In the *Outlook* section is an article by Darshan Karwat (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/10/29/all-my-trash-for-a-year-fit-into-two-plastic-bags-heres-how-i-did-it/>). He's concerned about "environmental problems, sweatshop labor and other harmful practices that

go into [the making of] things.” So he found a way to stop generating trash and recycling.

Consistent with our own concern for those who are hungry, in the Business Section, Michelle Singletary, in her column “The Color of Money” commends to our attention a book entitled *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* by Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer. Of this book she writes: “I was moved and ashamed that I’m not doing more. This book is a call to action for all of us to look at our nation’s anti-poverty policies, because clearly the safety net isn’t catching enough people.” Perhaps our next step in our spiritual practice of feeding the hungry will move us into the sphere of greater advocacy.

God calls each of us into relationship with God and with one another. We know that the witness of Scripture is that we are to show concern for those who have the least resources. We know from today’s Gospel that Jesus is lifting up to us wholehearted faith, a faith that gives our all. As we move into this Thanksgiving season and beyond into Advent, may we too be moved to a faith that is wholehearted, with a commitment that says “I’m all in!”

AMEN.

