

November 11, 2018

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Good morning,

As Christians we are a storied people, we are people of the book. We take our understanding of life and look for guidance in the narratives we find in our scriptures, and through the lived experiences of those who come before us. We begin to embrace this walk of faith as we join into the pilgrimage of a storied life. As we begin to live in this way, we start to see the common threads of our story with the stories in our scripture texts. Not the exact same, but a similar wrestling for answers, a searching for peace, and the complexity of violence.

The reason that I asked Sue and Helen to read this morning's scripture texts is because the two stories reminded me of two women, whose stories challenged me to look again at how I was living out a commitment to peace. I will share a piece of those stories here with you today, using the names Sue & Helen to protect the anonymity of the true keepers of these stories.

The first text we listened to was from Mark. It's a story that I always heard growing up as an easy lesson. The poor self-sacrificing woman as a hero, a person to emulate and strive to be like. The rich pompous scribes were to be scorned - easy lesson, no body likes a show-off. It took me some deeper witness to understand where the threads of this story would work to challenge me to new understandings of peace.

Many of you know, a couple years ago I was living in Vancouver in a house that was committed to community and outreach ministry. We didn't have a Sunday service, but it was clear that this was a place of 'church' for many of the people who came. One day after we had a few women over for dinner my friend Sue came up to me and set a toonie into my hand. At first I was very confused, but then she explained to me that this was her tithe, and that she had just received her cheque for the month so she was dividing up her tithe between the different places she had 'church.' She wasn't bragging in her explanation, just trying to alleviate the confused expression I was making, which was quickly being replaced by a look of shock.

Here I was living smack dab in the middle of a biblical story. Sue was quite literally giving me the last two dollars she had divided out from her months cheque. Sue is not someone who had money to spare, she always ate meals at service kitchens (and twice a week at our house), whenever we created something artistic she would save her piece to try and sell on the street later that day. She had multiple barriers in her life that aligned her with the same social capital of the poor widow in Mark 12. And here I was, also a part of this narrative. Floored at how different the lived reality of this moment was compared to the simple story line I had always understood.

The book of Mark is always circling back to the topic of exploitation, and in this story Jesus is using this narrative as more than a simple condemning of bad actions and praising of good ones. Gazing back into Sue's eyes I was infuriated as I realized how the story leaves us with a widow made destitute by her tithing obligation. I couldn't breathe as I realized where I was sitting in a system of church, of community that thought it appropriate to praise the widow who gives her two coins and then leaves her with nothing. Yes Sue's actions here - beautiful, selfless, and humble.

But I had a whole new fury towards why Jesus was condemning the scribes. Earlier in Ch. 7 Jesus criticizes piety as a mask for robbery saying **“you have a fine way of resetting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition!”** This story is not just a criticism of the individuals who take advantage, but also of a church tradition that is held in a manner that decimates the resources of the vulnerable only to further benefit the wealthy. As Jean Vanier notes “it is easier to follow rules than is to love people.”

Jesus is opening up space for all of us to recognize where we can look to right the violence that is taking place within this story, not just the violence of pride but the systematic economic oppression. Jesus was never about a simple peace, but instead shalom.

That is the beauty of being a storied people. We are living in the messiness of real life, where peace is hard to comprehend and harder to live for. And instead of being given unattainable ideals to shoot for, we are given a God who is going to walk with us through this messiness. Who will make a record of the noble actions of Sue within the gospel while still working to undo the system that put her in that situation. Understanding both how to seek justice in the immediate and pursue shalom in the long term. Pulling out the beautiful actions of peace encased in an imperfect setting.

The second story from today's scriptures is the story of Ruth. There are many layers and important teachings to this story (as in any great story) but we are going to try and pick out the lesson that is highlight in today's selection of verses. You may have noticed but the beginning and middle of this tale have been cut out in this week's lectionary selection.

There is nothing here from the verses that highlight leaving some of the harvest for the poor and vulnerable to glean from. Ruth's declaration of love and commitment to Naomi is not a part of this story, nor are many of the honourable actions of Boaz where he instructions male field workers to respect Ruth as she is working, or when he accepts the responsibility of caring for Ruth's family and providing a child to continue her deceased husband's name. Again - lots to work with in this Book, but instead the verses have been cut back to highlight a different subtext to this story.

Reading the first clump of verses we are given a picture of two women who have little to no options for surviving in this world. Ruth has made a commitment to Naomi's life and now Naomi instructs Ruth to give herself to Boaz because it's their only real chance of being restored from the margins of society. Reading these verses with the context of how vulnerable these women are, caused me to think of another story that I have been given.

In Winnipeg I got to attend an event that was being put on by Heart of the City, which is an organization focused on human trafficking within the city. I had only gone out with them once before but a friend of mine was very committed to the organization. A large part of what they try to do is build relationships with the women who are out working on the streets, providing them with a van to warm up in, a conversation partner and if they are open to it resources to help assist them with whatever barriers they are facing. The event had people telling stories to illustrate the needs of the organization and the complexity of the violence they were trying to face.

One volunteer went up to talk about how survival limits the choices of these women. One night she was out driving around and a woman named Helen came into the van for a hot chocolate and to take some time to warm up. It was below -30 without the wind chill. They had met Helen a couple times doing their rounds and had begun to develop a bit of a relationship with her. Helen said she couldn't stay long and had to get back out there, then she added "I need to find somewhere to sleep tonight, or I'll freeze." The volunteer was surprised "your working tonight to find a place to sleep" Helen nodded "Unless you've got a place for me." They called every shelter they could think of, but on such a cold night everywhere was full. The organization has policies against volunteers opening up their own homes. Helen thanked them for trying and got out of the van. It was barely a minute before the volunteers watched a truck pick her up.

This is not the same story that we read about in Ruth, but when I read this week's text Helen's story came back to me so strongly that I broke down, sobbing. Ruth was also in a position where she needed to put herself at someone else's mercy in order to survive. In Ruth's story we learn that Boaz is a good person, is respectful and does everything he can by societies laws to provide for Ruth and Naomi. But Ruth didn't have a guarantee that it would turn out that way. She was vulnerable and without options, and living within a system that perpetuate gender violence.

The way today's verses are cut up leave a pause between the moment Boaz takes Ruth to marry her, and the moment where Ruth agrees to put herself at the mercy of a very broken system to claim refuge. And that is where Helen's story took a different turn. It's that difference that left me sobbing when I came home from that event in Winnipeg and stared at my couch, knowing I am in a safe space, that I have an extra spot to sleep, and somehow in the same city Helen was left to seek shelter at the hands of someone who already felt it was acceptable to take advantage of the vulnerable.

The story of Ruth ends well, in a horrible situation Ruth asks Boaz to take responsibility for his Kin, to allow them a way out of their poverty, and Boaz finds a way to make that happen. But that does not mean that this is the vision of Shalom that we are to look for. Because in the space between these two sections of the story we are left to ask how could this happen? Why is this Ruth's only option?

The scripture stories are not there to show us pictures of what perfect peace looks like. They show us the way that love and peace can be found and held within the lived reality of violence. That there is a place for Ruth, for the Widow, for Sue, for Helen in the story of Christian pilgrimage because God won't look away or try to gloss over the stories of those who are suffering in this world.

Instead our stories make room for these people, they bring them to light on Sunday morning, and stare back at us from the eyes of the poor during our week. They remind us that we are not going to accept a shallow definition of peace but that we will wade into the messiness of this world, continuing the pilgrimage back to a state of shalom. And along the way these stories will continue to give us the why and little glimpses of the how we are going to try and bring this about.

The solution to the violence in Ruth's story is not to embody a character of Boaz that is 'hero.' He is not a random wealthy male that is there to save a poor female damsel in distress. He is family, stepping up to the responsibility required of him from the law at that time - even if there is no one there who can enforce accountability. The whole book of Ruth is a story of solidarity, showing us what it means to accept the responsibility of taking in the vulnerable and making them family. Whether it's Ruth's commitment to Naomi, or Boaz's marriage to Ruth.

Today Brent led us in a moment of silence, both in solidarity with those who are pausing for people who have fought in wars and as an alternative to that same reality. To make space for remembrance of violence and non-violence, remembering the peace that is here and the peace that is yet to come.

The promise of Jesus is that the poor are a source of light, that they show us most clearly where there is beauty and goodness and where there is violence and brokenness. Recently there has been some reeducation in the work of solidarity. Previously there was a push for those with privilege to bring voice to the voiceless. But now there is a wiser counsel. In solidarity we need to step back and give room for the so called voiceless to speak. To listen to them sharing their stories, or we will mistake addressing the immediate need as the whole solution, or worse mistake ourselves as the saviours. We are called instead to be family to one another.

To recognize the strength in the love that already exists in the widow's generosity in Mark and the responsibility Ruth reminds us of. To allow the beauty of these moments to give us enough hope in goodness, to recognize that present in our weeping is a deep remembrance of the call to another way, and to step up to the work of peace.

****Introduce Song ****

- Tom Wuest
- Was in DTES
- looking for Hope in the complexity of violence
- Wrote this after moving to Ohio