

## **“Quintessential Contribution”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
November 10, 2024 - Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

[Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-44](#)

A tale of two widows is what we have in today’s lectionary collection. More precisely, we have two tales of four widows, who have some wisdom to contribute to us this morning.

The first of these brought to our attention in today’s readings is Naomi, of whom we also read in last week’s reading from the Hebrew scriptures. We heard how she traveled with her husband and two sons from Bethlehem in the hill country of Palestine to the foreign land of Moab, just east of the Dead Sea, to escape from famine in her homeland. While in Moab, Naomi’s husband died, leaving her a widow, but one who still had two sons to provide for her, which was essential in patriarchal societies, as those in Moab and Judah were, for in these, women had little agency, or ability to act, outside of the home, and a widow without either a husband or sons to care for her would have been in a precarious social position. Such widows were oftentimes the victims of exploitation, injustice, and oppression, and lived difficult lives without hope for anything better.

Naomi’s sons, however, were able to provide for her as they lived in the land of Moab, and they married two Moabite women, which provided Naomi the prospects of taking care of and receiving care from an expanding household. But after ten years of living in the land, the sons of Naomi also died, leaving their childless wives as widows. To spare her daughters-in-law from experiencing bleak lives as familyless widows, Naomi encouraged them to return to the homes of their parents, where they might be provided for and have more dignified lives as Naomi herself returned to her hometown of Bethlehem, which was no longer experiencing famine, to live the hard life of a widow alone.

One of the daughters-in-law indeed returned to her family’s home in Moab, but the other, Ruth, refused to leave Naomi, choosing in compassionate love, to remain with her, to care for her, and to experience with her whatever hardships she might face as a widow together with her. Surely, Ruth would have known that she would have faced an exceptionally difficult life in Bethlehem as she

would have lived there not only as a widow, but also one who was an uninvited and unwelcomed foreigner, and yet she chose to remain connected in love to Naomi and to face these bleak prospects with her rather than finding an easier life in the home of her parents. Moved by her concern for her mother-in-law, Ruth selflessly gave up her own prospects of having something of a secure, comfortable life and traveled with Naomi to Bethlehem.

In today's reading from the Book of Ruth, we read how Naomi returned Ruth's kindness and worked to provide for her while in Bethlehem by giving her some dating advice, teaching Ruth how to effectively gain the attention, even as a poor and unseen foreign widow, of a wealthy, caring relative of Naomi named Boaz. Even though Ruth was a foreigner, and it would have been considered taboo, Boaz married her, thus providing for her and her mother-in-law more secure and hopeful lives.

The story ends with Ruth and Boaz having a son together, who was cared for by his parents and his grandma Naomi, and who would himself become the grandfather of David, the greatest king of Israel. Ruth and Naomi could never have imagined such a scenario when they were living as widows in Moab. Their prospects looked absolutely bleak there, but bleak prospects did not stop Ruth from controlling what she could and doing what she knew was right and good by remaining with and taking care of her mother-in-law rather than looking after herself. Through Ruth's faithfulness and lovingkindness, which was then returned by Naomi and her relative Boaz, a whole nation was blessed, and, from our perspective, the whole world would be blessed for Ruth's great grandson David was the ancestor of Jesus, also born in the little town of Bethlehem many generations later.

Our gospel reading from Mark told us of Naomi and Ruth's descendent Jesus as he himself saw a widow in the temple in Jerusalem, just a few miles from Bethlehem, and pointed out to his disciples that she had dropped into the temple offering jar a couple of pennies to support the temple's work. Life for widows in Jesus' day was just as difficult as it was in the day of Naomi and Ruth, and Jesus noted that her gift of a couple pennies, though it may have seemed small and insignificant, likely was all that she had, so though she was poor and had no

prospects for a secure and comfortable life, she did not retreat in selfishness, but was extravagantly generous, giving everything to support the worship of God.

Her selfless, loving action contrasted with the actions of the scribes that Jesus also saw in the temple. Scribes were well-educated, literate officials who acquired wealth and high status among the people, and as such were pretty much the social opposites of widows, who were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Jesus pointed out that so much of the scribes' piety -- the long and fancy prayers they offered, their long and fancy garments they wore, and their long and fancy teachings given in local synagogues -- were all done not out of faithful, humble devotion to God, but to add to their own glory. In contrast to their self-glorifying acts, the penny-giving widow, though already absolutely humbled, lowered herself even more in her God-glorifying act, and she showed the better way to be. She was, in fact, in her complete, selfless dedication to God, an exemplar of the best way to be as one offering a quintessential contribution.

At the time of the widow's gift, the sages of the Greco-Roman world believed that the stuff of the world consisted of four elements, earth, fire, water, and air. Aristotle contributed a fifth element, ether, the often unseen, heavenly stuff that fills the rest of space and swirls around the stars and planets. This fifth element, or *quinta essentia* in Latin, came to be understood as the heavenly, perfect stuff that surpasses earthly limitations.

The widows of today's lessons show us the heavenly, quintessential ways of living, rather than the limited, earthly ways of good living that we so commonly value. Earthly wisdom teaches us to climb, like the scribes, to the loftiest positions in society; the ethereal, quintessential wisdom of the widows teaches that the loftiest role, however, is the place of the selfless servant of God and people. They teach us to risk every earthly, known thing, even if we have but little, for the good of God and those God calls us to care for. They teach us to act selflessly and do what is right and good for others no matter the challenges that may befall us or other consequences we may face in so doing. They teach us that even when we feel small and powerless, when life or our prospects for it seems bleak, and especially when we are deeply disappointed by the direction the world takes, God can work through our selfless, good, and right work to bring great blessings to us, those around us, and the unknown generations to come. Amen.