

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17
Mark 12:41-44
November 10, 2024

Mites

In the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, a *mite* is defined as a minute arachnid, which has four pairs of legs when adult, and is related to ticks. Many live in soil and some are parasites on plants and animals. For our present purposes, this definition is not helpful.

There are a few other definitions: a small child or animal, especially when regarded as the object of sympathy. Or, more simply, a small amount, of anything. Maybe we are getting somewhere.

And finally, "a small copper coin of very low face value." In the Bible it serves as the English translation for *lepta*, or *kodrantēs*, which mean little to us, but it is not very valuable. In some commentaries, it is valued at a fraction of a penny. Now we have arrived. It may be fairer now to say it is a little more valuable than that, perhaps a couple of pennies.

During the last week of his life, when Jesus was in the temple area he noticed the treasury and how some were placing in it large donations. Then, a "poor widow," showed up and gave two small copper coins, the English mite, the widow's mite.

Jesus was impressed because in terms of what they had, the richer folks and the widow, she had given more, because she had given all; she couldn't pay for

anything, therefore she couldn't pay anything off. She couldn't delude herself that she could offer a bribe to God, and if she wasn't able to bribe God with an offering, she also couldn't make a large enough donation to buy standing in the temple management or influence among the priests and other leaders.

She wasn't buying anything, just giving. The others? To one degree or another, I am sure they were giving too, but Jesus notices them anyway, because they were not giving all they had. That much can be said.

Part of the story involves the simple fact that Jesus noticed her. To notice those making larger contributions is easy enough, they can bribe somebody and buy influence. They have presence. But to notice the widow, to see and perhaps to hear her, that is remarkable.

The world is full of unseen people, of all stripes. Here, part of the meaning of our faith, is that we have been seen by God no matter who we are or how little we have; and that even after we resist and try hard to focus on other, more attractive things, we too will come to see our unseen neighbors.

Sometimes, in the lectionary readings there is a theme, or some kind of connection between the readings. In this week's case the story of the "widow's mite," is accompanied in the Old Testament reading by the story of the the widow Naomi, and her daughter-in-law Ruth.

The story of Ruth is of how a woman from Moab who didn't have anything, wasn't considered very valuable, became the great-grandmother of the Israelite king, David. There are some edgy stories in the Old Testament that are often left out of our polite Sunday morning worship services. The lineage of the moabites is one of them. You can find the following in the 19th chapter of Genesis, beginning in verse 30.

Like many of Israel's neighbors in the time before the monarchy, Moab was a cousin to Israel, in their case, through Abraham's nephew Lot. In the biblical story, Moab was Lot's son by Lot's older daughter, an incestuous relationship that resulted from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, when Lot and his daughters were hiding in a cave. The daughters thought his line would disappear from history, so they got their father drunk and became pregnant. They both had sons, one of them was Moab.

Hundreds of years later, after the Exodus from Egypt, when Israel was in the wilderness east of the Dead Sea (which is in modern-day Jordan), the moabites had become a small nation that did not worship Israel's God, and they did not help the Israelites in their hour of need. As a matter of fact, the King of Moab even hired a prophet to curse them. That story is related in the Book of Numbers, chapters 22-24, and even involves a talking donkey.

The long and short of it is that Moab and Israel had become enemies, and the Israelite men were forbidden on pain of death from taking wives from the

Moabite women. But in the time before the monarchy, some of them did, including Ruth. Her Israelite husband died.

In what has to be seen as a risky move, she moved to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi, became the wife of Boaz, the mother of Obed, the grandmother of Jesse, and the great-grandmother of David, the King of Israel. So that in the lineage of David, and all their kings, was just a touch of the despised moabites.

With edgy Old Testament stories on our minds, consider how it happened. At the instruction of Naomi, she went into the tent where Boaz was sleeping and lay down at his feet, clearly offering herself to him. And she was noticed, I am sure that wasn't a miracle. But the miracle is that by God's grace Boaz treated her right, and he found a man who had a previous claim, and honored that claim, which was renounced. Ruth and Boaz married, thus integrating a moabite ancestry into the line of David.

The reason why the story of Ruth receives so much attention, without any attention given to David's mother, for instance, or grandmother, *is* because Ruth was a despised foreigner. It is part of Israel's story that is not only interesting, but also amazing, that they even tell this part of the story. It has been said that God works in mysterious ways.

For instance, the story of Jesus, which is the story of a relatively obscure and poor Galilean carpenter who led a religious movement in the early days of the Roman

Empire. Though he preached a positive message of forgiveness and reconciliation and new life, he ran afoul of the authorities and was handed over to the Romans, who executed him as a troublemaker at best, and an insurrectionist at worst.

Yet the story of Jesus is that his death was redemptive, not in spite of its nature, but because God was in it, reconciling the world. It is not a far-fetched statement to say that Jesus has become the most influential person in the history of the world. God works in mysterious ways.

I am sure that the people who lived the history, Balaam and Boaz and Naomi and Ruth and David and all the rest, in their time had no idea of God's intentions, and maybe not even the tellers of the tales that came along hundreds of years later, such is the majesty of God's redemptive love in the world, that it can be happening right before one's eyes and not be understood.

After the moabites were off the stage of history, and Greece and Rome as well, after the Temple and its priests were gone, it is still not well understood. What does it mean to redeem the world? We are not meant to understand, but to marvel at it.

It turns out that Ruth is mentioned on the first page of the New Testament as a part of the ancestry of Jesus. Ruth, the descendant of Lot by his daughter, an ancestress of David, was an ancestor of Jesus. So

Jesus was a descendant of Lot as well as Abraham, so we are told on the first page of the New Testament.

The message is that God has seen and heard, and has loved us all; that Jesus, whose life and teaching reveal the mercy and love of God for every person, whoever they are, *has seen us all*, the ones who have and the ones who do not, the ones we see and the ones we don't see, but also including us, including you. Israel, by the ancestry of its own royal line, is everybody.

And his suffering and death do not just reveal but substantively *are*, reconciliation with God. This is God's doing, established from the foundation of the world, playing out in every history, even the edgy ones that make us a little uncomfortable . . . and the boring ones, even our own. We bring nothing to it that matters, not even our two cents, except our selves, which is valuable in God's eyes.

Our opportunity and responsibility is to accept, which is called faith, and to live accordingly, with graciousness and courage. Though we do not become like God, in that mysterious way that grace and faith collide, we find ourselves inclined and empowered to better imitate God, by imitating Ruth's descendant in the flesh, even Jesus Christ our Lord. To whom we give our lives, our very selves.

Romans 5:12-21

12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

13 To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. 14 Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

15 But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!

16 Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. 17 For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

18 Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. 19 For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

20 The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all

the more, 21 so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 - Paul was not in prison when he wrote Romans. Most believe he was in Corinth, just before his trip to Jerusalem with the offering he had collected for the church there. See Romans 15

2 - The issue with Augustine and the poorly translated Latin, - "through whom all people sinned," rather than, "because all people sinned." This has to do with the definition of Original Sin and how it is incorporated into a fuller biblical theology.

3 - Original Sin can be thought of as a standard feature of the human condition, that we are born with in some way, and it can be thought of as the result of our own sinning. Adam is called a type.

4 - Jesus is the one who brings the realm of Grace:

Sin/Trespass - Justification

Obedience - Disobedience

Law - Grace

Adam - Christ

Sin abounding - Grace abounding more

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