

When to Gather and When to Go

The story of Ruth and Naomi may seem unusual as the Scriptural basis of a Communion meditation, as the excerpts from this passage often used in wedding celebrations (where you go,,,,,) may seem when placed in context of conversation between mother & daughter-in-law during a time of grief. Yet I find in the story of these women the story of life. I find myself entering into the story at varying points, in conjunction with the situations and circumstances of living. As I walk through the aspects of this story, minus the specifics, I pray that you too might hear in it the cycle of life:

Famine – loss – need

Drawing near – going – settling in a new place ** Calm and peaceful

Death – loss – unable to go it alone

Confusion – doubt – decisions in the midst of uncertainty

Personal choice --- conversation – acceptance -- reforming ** moving on

A part of the richness of communion, the coming together, remembering, retelling and retaking of God's grace, is how it is essential and speaks to every part of life. We are so blessed, and perhaps hindered, in that all that is necessary for Communion is so lovingly prepared and the paraphernalia and elements are readily available. The family of Ruth had times like that, good times, times of gathering together and prosperity.

In such times we can forget that there is a great difference between what is necessary and what is essential. In such times we can lose sight of what we seek and what we receive. We can easily forget that, as Dana Gioia wrote "it is not the rituals we honor but our trust in what they signify" in worship and in life. The means and methods can become what we cling to, and that may serve well enough in such good times.

It is in other times, times when we cannot provide, for ourselves or others, times such as the times in which our Biblical story took place, that the invitation and the grace of God are the only things which are strong enough to support us. When we are at times of famine, financial, material, emotional, physically, spiritually, all are a part of the ebb and flow of life, when we do not have what may seem necessary that the richness and completeness of the essential becomes a greater reality.

Worship, and living as a community of faith, provides a place to "rehearse" faithful living. When we set the Communion table, with love and care, using our finest, then open it to all who choose to come, we are rehearsing how to share of all we have and all we are in Christ's name, we are rehearsing extending an open invitation, rehearsing welcoming each and all who come and we are rehearsing not judging nor keeping track of who chooses no to. Though Oprah's story is not finished, I sense that Ruth continued to love her, the one who chose to remain behind, as deeply and truly as the one who walked beside. Yet what if we could not? What if we had nothing to share, nothing to serve on, no comfortable place to gather? What if we are simply too exhausted, to be gracious? What if no one had remembered to prepare the bread and the cup?

Holy Communion would still be available, Christ's invitation and God's grace, that which is indeed essential, would still flow in abundance. Love could be shared, hope could be spoken, God will be present and souls will be satisfied. We can invite, even when we have nothing to share, because God grants us the awesome privilege of being vessels of The Holy Spirit. Ruth, Naomi and Oprah gathered, as family and in love, then for Ruth and Naomi it was time to go, for Orpah time to return, yet God was with them all.

There is great power and gift, when we, in times of plenty, imagine and plan for times of famine. As we grasp the essential in the midst and with the help of the necessary, we have a firmer grasp when there is nothing to hang on to, nothing to give, nothing except God. And we acknowledge that the invitation is offered to people in all situations and circumstances of life. We need not know who prepared the table, though we give thanks for those who do, we need not know who comes in the midst of plenty or in the face of famine. All we need do is gather at the table, receive, and then go forward on our journey.

There's a beautiful incident recorded by Thomas Pettepiece, a Methodist pastor, who was a political prisoner. Pettepiece writes of his first Easter Sunday spent in prison. He was among 10,000 prisoners. Most of the men had lost everything: their homes, their jobs, their furniture, their contact with their families. It was Easter Sunday, and they wanted to celebrate Communion. But, they had no cup for Communion. They had no wine for Communion. They didn't even have water for Communion. Nor did they have any bread for the Sacrament.

So, they practiced the Communion of Empty Hands. "This meal in which we take part ... The bread is the body which was given for humanity. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The cup, which we don't have today, represents our dream of a united humanity, of a just society..."

The pastor, held out his empty hand to the next person on his right, and passed on the imaginary loaf. Each one took a piece and passed it on. Then he said, "Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And together they ate the imaginary bread, trying to imagine tasting it.

After a moment they passed around the non-existent chalice, each imagining he was drinking from it. "Take, drink, this is the blood of Christ which was shed for you ... Let us give thanks, sure that Christ is here with us, strengthening us."

They gave thanks to God and then stood up and embraced each other. And a while later, one of the non-Christian prisoners came up to them and said, "You people have something special, which I would like to have."

That something special the power of God flowing in and through us. That something special is will bring others to the table, rather finely set or seemingly empty. Let us come, let us taste, let us know that it is God we seek and God we receive, and that alone is sufficient.