

“Risk and Restoration”
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

Once upon a time there was a poor Inupiat woman in Alaska. She didn't have enough to eat or clothes warm enough to keep the Arctic cold away. One day a newspaper reporter came into the village where the little girl lived. He saw the girl's poverty and decided to ask her a few questions. He asked her, “Do you believe in God?” “Yes, I do,” said the little girl. “Do you believe God loves you?” asked the reporter. Again, the girl said, “Yes, I do.” “If you believe God loves you, then why do you think you don't have enough food or enough warm clothes to wear?” She answered: “I think God asked someone to bring me these things. But someone said NO!”

How do we respond when God calls us to relieve the suffering of others? Do we even hear the call? What is even harder is dealing with the root causes of poverty and redeeming the whole situation that caused the little girl and many others like her to be hungry and without clothes in the first place. This leads us beyond dealing with the one individual case to questioning the whole economic structure of a community, a country and even the world.

Today's Bible story is about responding to God's call to fulfill the laws and practices that provide for the poor and oppressed in society. It is the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. They were both left destitute after their husbands died and they were without male protection, which was essential for survival in that time. Naomi, her husband and her sons had immigrated from Bethlehem to Moab in order find food. That is where one of Naomi's sons married Ruth, a Moabite woman, a foreigner to Israel. But when the male protectors of the family died, Naomi had to go back to her home in Bethlehem. The two wives of her sons did not have to leave their homes and their security. But Ruth decided to go back with Naomi and help redeem her rights. The story of Ruth occurred during the period of the Judges, before Israel crowned its first king. It is a very important story because it proves that the people of Israel did practice the economic laws that God gave to them of the Sabbatical Year and the Jubilee. These practices were established by God for the people of Israel to periodically redistribute their wealth “so that there are no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4). The Sabbatical year was established so that every seven years all debts of all Israelites were to be forgiven (Deut. 15:1-11). To accomplish this, of course, would require a massive redistribution of wealth. This way those who through misfortune (like Naomi) or even poor management had sunk into poverty over that seven-year period would, through the forgiving of their debts, receive a transfer of wealth in order that they could begin all over again. No one was supposed to lose the land of their birthright. There were many protections against that. So, Ruth was trying to secure back the land that her mother-in-law has the right to by birthright. She was working to bring redemption to her mother-in-law.

The concept of redemption in the Old Testament is a very central one. This is also the main concept in the book of Ruth. In fact, it is that practice that tells us that at least this element of Jubilee was being actively practiced in pre-monarchial Israel. The words “redeem” (ga'al) and “redeemer” (go'el) is used 20 times in the 4 chapters of the book of Ruth. This word is often translated into English as “act as next-of-kin” (cf. 3:13) and “nearest kin” (cf. 2:20). “Redeem” in Hebrew means “to buy back” or “to repossess”, and it is primarily in its origins an economic term. It means to free one from a legal or financial obligation by a transaction or agreement that takes place. This is what provides the indicator within the story of Ruth that Jubilee was being observed.

The Year of Jubilee occurred every 49 years – on the Sabbath year of the Sabbatical Years. Thus, Israel had built into its economy a means for redistributing wealth by eliminating the possibility of inheriting purchased wealth; that is, no rich person could accumulate land and

pass it on to his heirs, who could then accumulate even more land. No matter how much land you had accumulated over those 49 years, you had to surrender that land to the families who held that land as birthright. There was always the chance of redemption not just in spiritual terms but also in economic terms.

Ruth's offer to join Naomi in Israel opened up to the older woman the option of regaining her lost birthright land. If her daughter-in-law would marry a kinsman, that kinsman could act as "redeemer", reclaim and pay for the repurchase of Naomi's land and restore it to Naomi to provide her with financial security for the remainder of her life and for her heirs. And that is exactly what happened. Boaz decided to marry Ruth and as a result Naomi's right to the land is restored. In addition to Ruth being a story about friendship and love, it is a story about economic redemption and just economic systems that were created and practiced so that no one would be poor. Even as a Moabite, an immigrant, a person of another faith, Ruth was invited into the household of Israel's faith and in fact acted as a redeemer for her mother-in-law.

This understanding of redemption can challenge our tendencies to spiritualize faith in ways that separate the spiritual realm from the economic realm. But in the kingdom of God, all aspects of life are connected. The covenant is not about a pie in the sky relationship with God. It is about the daily life of the people. Is our faith about salvation and redemption limited to the inner struggles of life? Our prayer life must inform our actions and our actions must inform our prayer life. All the pieces are connected. Advocating and practicing just economics are just as important to our spiritual lives as our involvement in church and even our prayer life. In their book *To Do Justice* Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty write that, "Christianity is not simply a personal and private matter between an individual and God; it is also about community responsibility and faithfulness in public life- social, political, and economic." We live in a very difficult time for our economy. I am not just referring to the recent recession. I am also referring to the reality of greed in many of the big corporations in our world where the rights of workers are trampled on for the sake of increasing the pay of top managers. In his book, *The New Inequality*, Harvard Economist Richard Freeman notes that, "Income inequality in the United States has massively increased. This jump owes to the unprecedented abysmal earnings of low-paid Americans, income stagnation covering about 80 percent of all families, and an increase in upper-end incomes. The rise in inequality –greater than in most other developed countries- has reversed the equalization in income and wealth we experienced between 1945 and 1970." When we hear discussions in our country about not increasing the wages of workers or having to reduce the pay of workers, we rarely ever hear about not increasing the pay for the CEO's of those companies. Just to give you an example, last year according to Forbes.com the CEOs of America's five hundred biggest companies received an average pay raise of 54%. Of course, many of these CEOs were not doing a good job in leading their companies.

I am not an economist. In fact, I don't personally like numbers that much. But what I know is that as a person of faith, I find it challenging to know about all these inequalities without doing anything about it. I see that our faith in Christ is a direct challenge for us individually and as a community of faith to bring redemption, both spiritual and economic, to our communities and world. As people of faith, we have the burden and responsibility to challenge the greed that is behind a lot of our economic practices and structures. We also have to lift up models that promote economic justice. A few years ago, Malden Mills, manufacturer of Polartec and Polarfleece fabrics, was destroyed by fire. Rather than moving the mill overseas, CEO Aaron Feuerstein rebuilt it in the same location in Massachusetts and paid his workers as the mill was being rebuilt. A devout Jew, Feuerstein said to a reporter, "I have a responsibility to the worker both blue-collar and white-collar...I have an equal responsibility to the community."

Another example to lift up to you today is the World Wide Christmas Fair that is being held right here in our church next Saturday, November 14. This is a tremendous effort that is based on a vision for just economics. The fair trade movement is a global grassroots effort to re-align economic relationships between manufacturers and growers (usually in developing countries) and consumers (usually in the developed West) in terms of social justice rather than monetary profit alone. It is a way to pay people a living wage for what they produce. Instead of being only interested in getting the cheapest product, we are invited to think about buying less and paying for things that are being produced in ways that don't harm the environment and don't exploit people. I know that many of you here support this effort because you know that it puts our faith into action and challenges us into greater faithfulness in the way we shop.

As we dedicate our pledges for this coming year, I invite you to consider the connection between your giving and the promotion of God's kingdom right here on earth where we are called to participate in God's redemption of our economics and our way of life. By giving to others, we freely choose to risk our own safety and security to bring redemption to God's world, especially to those who are oppressed and exploited.

I recently read this story in the Christian Science Monitor October 6 issue. "What would impel someone to leave a good job and a great life in the Florida Keys and move to rural Minnesota in a snowstorm in February? For Gunnar Swanson, it all started six years ago, when he was serving in Iraq in the Army National Guard. One afternoon in 2003 he found himself aiming his M-16 rifle at a young Iraqi boy, warning the child, in a strong, nonverbal way, not to come any closer. The boy froze in his tracks, a puzzled look on his face, then ran off... In his 12 months in Iraq, which included surviving a close call from an exploding rocket-propelled grenade, this experience was one that affected Sergeant Swanson the most. "Pointing a gun at a child, threatening to shoot him," Swanson recollects. "I was 25 years old at the time, and it has weighed pretty heavy on me ever since then." Swanson left Iraq in 2004 and was discharged from the Army the following year, but his thoughts kept returning to the children he had seen and the cycle of violence in which they seemed to be trapped. He landed a dream job: training dolphins at a marine mammal educational center in Florida. "I was living a great life in Key Largo, but I knew that training dolphins wasn't my mission in life. My mission is to help these kids over in Iraq." Persistence, serendipity, and a little help from Google led Swanson to the perfect outlet for his passion: War Kids Relief (WKR), a nonprofit organization in Northfield, Minn., that works on behalf of children in Iraq and Afghanistan who have been deeply affected by war. Economic opportunities there are extremely limited make young people easy targets for the Taliban. After taking the position of program manager, Swanson has been going to schools and youth camps to speak to young people in this country and connect them with children in Iraq and Afghanistan. After each talk, Swanson passes out paper, pens, and art supplies, and the children write letters to their peers in the two war-torn countries. Swanson knows the value of hope that a letter can bring a child in a war-torn area. In all, 2,700 letters were collected and will be distributed sometime next year. Also, the children in our country are encouraged to do their own fundraising so that they can help build a youth center in Iraq and a vocational training center in Afghanistan. Swanson has found a real way to bring redemption to children in need. May we always be inspired by the examples of redeemers like Ruth, Boaz, and Swanson to bring God's redemption to our small corner of the world. Amen.