

## **“Creation is All Inclusive”**

**Sunday, September 12, 2010**

**Ruth 2:1-10**

The was a table grace that I learned in Sunday School that went like this – “God is Good, God is Great and we thank Him for our food. By his hand we all are fed give Lord our daily bread.” Bread, and broccoli and berries and for the meat eaters beef and for the vegans bulgar – God provides, God produces, God promotes. This summer from my little garden lot God brought forth tomatoes, eggplant, and sweet and hot peppers. Despite the heat, lack of rain and late night raids by squirrels, raccoons and possum and the benign neglect of the gardener a harvest happened. Most of what I harvested I gave to my daughter and some of it went into a rather creative dish or two as I prepared daily dinners for my wife and I. One concoction included grilled egg plant, sliced tomato, provolone cheese and spaghetti sauce. I stacked eggplant slices, tomato slices and cheese slices on a hamburger roll and spooned just the right amount of sauce over it all, put on the top of the roll, popped the whole thing into the office just long enough for the cheese to melt. Even Weslia thought it tasty. Today, we will wonder about the times God walks in and out of the garden with us from Eden to Gethsemane, from Frankford to Frankfurt, from Mexico to Miami, from Nicaragua to Niagra Falls, from Ireland to Indiana from Pakistan to Philadelphia. Today we will explore the eccentric and eclectic nature of God who creates everything and includes everything in executing an excellent eternal existence. God is good even when the garden is dead. Parts of God’s creation are at war in Afghanistan. Other parts are at odds over how to treat undocumented workers. Other parts are in a very public debate over the building of a mosque in Manhattan and still others are all heated up over a pastor’s threat to burn the Koran. The horrendous harvest and the famine of faith is spreading. As I waited to board my flight out of Chicago on Saturday morning, I listened to the First Lady, Michelle Obama speak in Shanksville, at the makeshift memorial for the heroes of Flight 93 -the passengers and crew members who elected to crash the plane instead of ride into the terrorist target. They are heroes because they sacrificed their lives so that many other lives would be spared. But she went on to say that many of them were everyday heroes in their daily lives. She mentioned that they were coaches, parents, caregivers – capable of extraordinary effort on behalf of even strangers. Ms. Obama mentioned a couple who quietly used their wealth to provide no-interest loans for folks in financial trouble and how one census survey worker would return to the some of the homes she visited after work was done to deliver groceries because she had noticed the cupboard was bare. “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me...” Today, in order to live into this spirit-filled story of Ruth we begin in a garden – a Bethlehem field busting with a barley harvest. But that wasn’t always the case. The back story is this. With her family, Naomi, Ruth’s mother-in-law, left Bethlehem for a foreign land to escape famine and to secure food for the future. She would go wherever she had to in order to provide food for her two sons and husband. While in Moab, a historically hostile place for Israelites like Naomi and her kin, they thrived for a time. The sons married Moabites women and together this blended family baked and broke bread. Then Elemilech, Naomi’s husband died. Not long after that tragedy, ten years into their marriages with the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth, both of Naomi’s sons died. A family famine flared. From food famine to family famine, Naomi has seen it all. Naomi wishes that her daughters-in-law would return home to Moab in order to find security. The Hebrew word variously translated as “turn,” “return,” “go back,” “turn back,” and “brought back,” occurs

fifteen times in the book of Ruth, twelve times in the first chapter. The word can be used to describe mental, emotional, or spiritual reversals. The word can refer when we turn away from God, apostasy as well as when we turn back to God (repentance). Funny thing about all this turning to and turning from there is God; Good God steadfast, steady and strong. Even when “turn”/“return” or “turn back” are used in geographical sense moral meanings are moving. Naomi uses the word in its most devastating sense and challenging sense when she states that God has turned against her. One commentator says, “Naomi’s life turns from “full” in the midst of famine to “empty” in the midst of plenty, and Naomi herself turns from “sweet” to “bitter.” Orpah wept and Ruth clung. Orpah returns home and Ruth turns to Naomi and her seemingly absent God and says “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and you God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well if even death parts me from you!” The book before Ruth, the Book of Judges shows how the lack of loyalty and kindness leads to division and death. Ruth illustrates what can happen when even a foreigner whose origins are despised in Israel chooses loyalty and kindness as a way of life. Ruth’s name is usually understood to be derived from the root word which means associate with and is the feminine form of the noun friend or companion. In the midst of Naomi’s (Israel’s) despair and blindness Ruth steps up to the challenge and not only “friends” Naomi she redeems her relationship with God. Ruth had no legal, cultural or moral obligation to Naomi in the eyes of ancient Israel yet she remained and made ready to sustain her stay with day labor in the fields. Her actions are thus way beyond the call of duty and reminiscent of a very special kind of love – a love known as *chesed* - awkwardly translated as steadfast love. *Chesed* is the radical kind of love we will talk about later. So in order to sustain her service to Naomi and to stay in the scene there in Bethlehem, Ruth goes to the garden of a leading man. There she gleans all of the grain she and Naomi needs to once again bake and break bread. Israelite landowners were forbidden to strip their fields completely clean as they harvested their crops. Those harvesting the crops were supposed to leave some stalks behind. The poor and the resident alien who had no land were then by law allowed to gather that which was left. Deuteronomy 24:19 states a slightly different version of the law: “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” Who hasn’t seen a neighbor in the street gleaning from what’s left over; picking up something dropped but discarded as useless; hoarding newspapers, rags and bags for cover and storage. Ruth is the one who gleans, picks up and hoards. Ruth is the one who redeems, restores, renews the life of a lost and bitter woman. Ruth is the image of a creative God caught at work not in the temple but in the trenches, not on the bandwagon but on the bench, not in line but out of bounds. The Book of Ruth just might be a radical refusal of a faithful few to accept the commonly held notion that foreign women in ancient Israel were the problem; were not the reason for God’s displeasure but in fact just might play a significant role in redeeming the soul of a nation and restoring a right relationship with God. God never places limits on who is called to serve God’s purpose. The Book of Ruth is a parable about God’s all inclusive and incarnational power and a warning to all that God is so good, God can touch anyone at anytime for anything God requires. And the truth about life and death is that we are never alone.