

“Identity”

Sunday, September 26, 2010

Ruth 1:6 – 2:5

The last verse in today’s Old Testament passage, Ruth 1:6-2:5, describes how the identification process worked in ancient Israel; signals how gender identity and marital status were incredibly important to the social standing and simple survival of women and provides the context for how God’s precious presence, sanctifying spirit, and gracious greatness transforms conformity and recreates procreation. Before we launch into the text and the truth tied to it, let’s loosen up a bit and listen to one another so as to prepare ourselves to listen to God. In just a few minutes I am going to count to three and when I get to three that is the signal for each of you to act on the instruction I am about to give you. After I count to three, as fast as you can, I want you to pair up - find a partner. It doesn’t matter if the person is related to you or a perfect stranger. The point is to pair up, in fact if it is easier to create a group of 3 or 4 that’s OK too. 1, 2, 3! Now that you are in pairs or very small groups I want you to take this opportunity to identify yourselves. Wait! Again let me offer the instructions first, count to three and then you act. After I count to three, determine who the oldest person in your grouping. The oldest among you will share first. If you are more than two then continue sharing in descending age order until the youngest among you gets to share. Remember today’s sermon is intentionally, intensifying the word identity. Identity is a word with many twists and turns, some of which we will try out today. For this exercise I want you to understand the word identity to mean – that which most connects to your understanding of yourself and corresponds to your own character. When it is your turn, share your responses to these questions: 1. with what person in all of human history do you identify most and 2. Why do you identify with this person. Is there a group that would like to share their conversation? Please come forward to the microphone so folks can hear. Thank you for sharing. As I prepared this part of the sermon instead of the question, with which person in all of human history do you identify, I was tempted to ask, with which member of the Philadelphia Phillies Baseball team do you identify? By now you know that I decided to use that piece for my “Time with the Children.” There are so many ways to identify ourselves and the more power we possess the more opportunity we have to proclaim who we are and more importantly what we want. So many of the social processes imposed upon us propel those with power and privilege to a place or position of personal identity that is on the one hand temporarily triumphant and on the other hand eternally exclusive. Think of the story of the Rich Young Ruler recorded in Luke 18:18-26. The question raised by those gathered around the teacher Jesus was, “Then who can be saved?” If the rich weren’t ready for God redemption; if the privileged weren’t primed for God’s reward and if the socially set weren’t satisfying the set of rules that lead to salvation: then who was, who is and who will? Those gathered demanded that Jesus identify those whom, God will rescue, reward, redeem and resurrect. So if personal wealth, influence and privilege don’t impress God, what does? Why are we obsessed with gaining personal power and do so much to identify and align ourselves with fleeting fame and fortune? Jesus answers the question, Who? by cutting us out of the center of the question and implanting God – Jesus replied, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” Jesus suggests that in place of power, privilege and personal gain we all need a major operation - a spiritual implant of God’s unmerited grace. There is at least one person in our congregation who has experienced the life renewing and radical generosity of the gift of a vital organ or two. Organ donors and organ recipients share an identity that in a

temporal way illustrates the spiritual truth tendered today: that God alone is good and great and that our identity is derived from that goodness and greatness. Derived from the implanting of God's image in our being at our birth beginning and at our second birth becoming. Our identity is as the people of God's created for God's redeeming, reconciling and renewing purposes. So, even though I identify as a grandfather, husband, father, son, brother, uncle, friend, neighbor – North American, Philadelphian, Frankford resident – Hempfield High School, Albright College and Duke University graduate – United Methodist Preacher, Albright College Trustee – homeowner, taxpayer, citizen, registered voter – that does not tell you who I really am. And certainly says nothing about who I am in God's eyes. You and I am much more than the adjectives, addresses and attitudes that we self-identify or are identified by others for us or about us. We are God's. So when Boaz asks in Ruth 2:5 – "To whom does this young woman belong," and when the reply comes in verse 6, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi," neither the one asking the question nor those answering the question know how deftly and deeply divine is God's intervention in this social scene and how Ruth's story suggests the divine intervention operating in our very own social scene. One very good way to exegete (interpret) a passage of scripture is to ask three fairly straightforward questions: 1. What is God's action in the passage? 2. What is the social, economic and political context in which the passage is set? and 3. with what character in the story do you identify most? In her commentary on the book of Ruth, Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer writes, "What types of people in our society face the same kind of problems as Naomi and Ruth faced in the world they inhabited? Who is forced by circumstances beyond their control to glean what they can from the bounty of others? Who in our world has no choice but to live on what is left over after those in control of the basic resources for life have taken everything they want or need?" Last week's social scene was sorry for those who worry about the Ruth's and Naomi's of our day. The Dream Act that sought to open a pathway to citizenship for thousands of undocumented youth, born in a foreign land but brought to the United States by parents and relatives fleeing economic and social disasters in their homeland, was not supported or advanced by the United States Senate. Victims of vitriolic voices, these youth, when they arrive at the high and hopeful hallmark of high school graduation are denied the opportunity to get a driver's license and to go to college. These kids are our Ruth and Naomi. The Sugar House Casino opened on Thursday to a cynical rendition of "God Bless America" and with a surprise visit from Benjamin Franklin accompanied by two buxom babes. The mass of humanity, 8,000 strong that waited in the late summer heat chanted "Go Home" to the remnant of citizens calling for an end to the gambling enterprise's economic exploitation and predatory practices. These 8,000 folks from poor and working class neighborhoods all over the region are our Ruth and Naomi. There is no American Dream; there is no Hitting It Big – at least not for the majority of the world's population. These are the myths that fuel the fear, fill up the folly and fan the fire of anti-immigrant sentiment; anti-gay legislation and anti-poor and working class social policy. God's identity is revealed in a spectacular yet still slightly veiled way in these two women – one foreign born and one forsaken. An immigrant and a misfortunate are chosen by God to be the next link in God's grand, glorious and gracious gesture in human history. If you ask me, God's, mission, if we choose to accept it, the mission to reconcile and redeem the world is far bigger than any manufactured dream and has better odds of paying off than hitting the slot machine jack pot.

