

Sermon for 24 October 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore  
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost/Reformation Sunday  
Scriptures: Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:11-14; Mark 12:28-34  
*"More than we know..."*

This time of year we get a bit crowded in our Scripture options for Sunday worship, because there's no official All Saints Sunday, but rather a choice between having it or one other more Sunday on either Job or Ruth.

I've chosen to have two Sundays on Ruth, and to have All Saints Sunday on 7 November. I encourage you to send me or Charles names of those who have died this year whom you'd like to have recognized on 7 November, in the week ahead.

Looking at today, we're also confronting many subjects, each with deep relevance for our faith walk.

The Book of Ruth may be one of the oldest in Scripture, speaking as it does of the period of the Judges, before Israel had a king. Or, it could have been written after the time of the Babylonian captivity, when Ezra and Nehemiah were rebuilding the city of Jerusalem and asking Jews to give up all relations in marriage with non-Jews ... as a story of protest against such a practice. Ruth, as we see, was a foreigner to her mother-in-law.

In any case, I urge you to read the book at home and reflect on its power, beauty, insight, and opposition to the male dominance of scripture in such convincing fashion. Spend some time with it in prayer, and come next week ready to contribute to our reflections in worship.

To undergird the basic hopefulness of Ruth, we have Psalm 146, with its encouraging Wisdom position that God can be trusted to bless the righteous person, regardless of life's hardships... actually supporting the ending to Job's story that we're not covering today. It bears noticing that Naomi reflects despair for a large part of the Book of Ruth, even though we'll see her rejoicing eventually, next week.

Continuing Hebrews, we read of the superiority of Jesus' witness in the minds of early Christians, not in breaking with the Old Testament description of God or the covenant with the people of Israel, but in the challenge he was able to make against rigid interpretation of law, and also in the conviction that Jesus had survived the limits of death in his resurrection and been real and spiritually present to his disciples and then to many others.

Finally, centering on the Gospel reading, comes the only time in Mark's Gospel that a kind word is spoken about a Jewish Bible scholar. Jesus'

affirmation of the scribe is a wonderful lesson to Christians on a topic that has often been abused by us.

Looking over this variety of texts, I've been living all week with the usefulness of Scripture for just such centering of my mind and my heart, my body and my thought, that Scripture provides, hour by hour and year by year. Many times I find the psalm saying more than I'm able to agree to, as when it declares, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet never have I seen the righteous neglected," or something like that. Or, I find a scripture that just doesn't let up in complaining about one's enemies, which seems to me an unhealthy attitude on a daily basis. In the quiet of reflection, I'm usually able to hear God encouraging me to consider anything, even my own fears or sadness or pain, as an enemy, and to take heart and believe I will survive and overcome whatever is pulling me down; or I'm able to consider that those people who HAVE gotten a raw deal in life, are both a call to me to pray and act constructively wherever I come upon suffering, and to keep that hope alive in any way I can within my surroundings, in how I vote, in what I encourage, regardless of the dimness of the present circumstances.

Beyond that there are stories like Ruth, and Esther, and Jonah, that simply show God's qualities, either in some character, or in the outcome of some event, that sit right there waiting to be referred to, almost as a psychological technique, a "positive thinking" exercise, that builds my trusting muscles.

You just never know... and with the encouragement of friends that we call church, and the songs that come to us in the daily round and the nightly quiet, we do find God without seeing or proving anything at the moment.

Certainly the Reformation illustrates that. The great urge to go beyond any contemporary arrangement of power, or worship style, or political option, is forever with us in true faith. It's not a matter of denomination, or even historic finality, although the Church has been guilty of saying and even proclaiming that. Reformation is always necessary, and always going on somewhere ... and this is such a moment ... literally next Sunday, this year, unless, as I've explained, we want to shift Sundays for other reasons and proclamation the good news of always reforming on this Sunday... Let us reflect on the fact, and the tradition, of breaking with old mistakes, starting afresh, being open to new insights, in every shape God's reality reveals to us. You just never know ..

May this Sunday be a reminder that the only truth is God's love, in all its forms; that we have ample witness to kindness and right-thinking and acting around us, every day ; and that letting God love us is the basis of all true comfort and peace.

In Jesus' name, Amen.