Sermon on All Saints
(Primarily Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34)

It’s remarkable, really, but in a story written over two thousand, five hundred years ago, a story that deals with traditional, rural, peasant farming life, the conundrums of modern urban living are already visible.

Having to move from the place of your roots when you can’t find work there; becoming an immigrant in a foreign country to find any kind of life at all; losing husbands and coping with widowhood in a society in which women were often routinely mistreated; undertaking cross-cultural and interreligious marriages and wondering which community you really belonged to.

That’s where we find ourselves at the beginning of this slim book of the Hebrew scriptures, the book of Ruth. At first it would appear to be a book not suited to the theme of the great Feast of All Saints, one of the great feasts of the Christian tradition,

but as in issues of modern culture and society, it proves itself remarkably adept. We need lived example of what Jesus’ summary of the law in our gospel reading might mean and this book gives us one.

And because this example is so unlikely, at least in terms of who might traditionally be thought a saint, it can confront each of us here today, irrespective of gender, irrespective of social background; irrespective, even, of religion, what it might mean for us to live into the fullness of our own calling.

The story begins with things going wrong. The famine in Bethlehem and surrounding regions is just one of those things; there’s no indication that it was an act of judgement, just a bad stretch of weather.

As a peasant farmer, Elimelek was like the majority of the population, just a couple of bad seasons from starvation. He hears that things are better in Moab.

From Bethlehem, he can look east across the deep Jordan valley, the Dead Sea at the bottom, and glimpse the mountains of Moab (modern Jordan) on the other side.

Of course there is no love lost between Israel and Moab, the ancient equivalent of the Palestinians and the Jews. Going there might be tragic and it certainly will be humiliating but he’s not about to sit still and watch his family die.

As the story goes, bad things continue to happen: Elimelek dies; perhaps after several years in Moab, the strain of the work—probably as a semi-slave to some local farmer—was just too much.

 Was it from a broken heart, a sense of failure as the breadwinner; a sense of shame at having to abandon his farm in the promised land?

The story doesn’t tell us, partly because this is a woman’s story! It’s Ruth’s story but it’s also Naomi’s, Elimelek’s wife.

There’s a subversive element at play; not only is it the story of women, it shows no shame when Naomi’s sons marry Moabite women, women who serve other gods besides Yahweh.

Naomi’s sons die as well; again, it’s just stated matter-of-factly, no judgement is rendered. Even though this is terrible, there is no sense that these things shouldn’t happen or that God must have caused it.

At about 40 years of age, Naomi is left alone in a foreign country with two foreign daughters-in-law of very different religious faith.

When she hears that the famine is over in Israel the story mentions God for the first time. Throughout the book it will be reticent to do so; again, quite radical for an ancient document but very congruent with how you and I experience God.

We too experience God somewhere in the middle of “stuff that just happens,” somewhere in the muddle of coincidences and human initiative; we too believe that God is with us, in us even, though we usually hesitate, if we’re wise, to say precisely how it is that God is working in and through history or our actions.

In the rains that have finally returned to Bethlehem, Naomi senses God calling her to return; she has, in truth very little choice. The abandoned family farm beckons even though there is no strong young man or men to till it’s soil.

The two daughters-in-law set off with Naomi but they have never been to this land; they will be repeating the immigrant experience of Elimelek and Naomi but with the added hurdle of leaving a more pluralist religious culture and joining a more fundamentalist one.

Israelite society has no place for Chemosh, the god of Moab and therefore very little tolerance for Moabites cf. earlier parts of the Hebrew Scriptures.

The two who leave with Naomi, Orpah (not Oprah! – how many lectors made that reading mistake this week!) and Ruth, are a family, it is true; the only possible source of consolation for Naomi, but Naomi is feeling cursed and doesn’t want the curse to fall on these two the way it appears to have fallen on her husband and sons.

They have Moabite families; better to go to them and find other husbands while they are still young; Naomi refers them back to “your mother’s household;” one of the many ways this story encourages readers to resist the patriarchal stereotype.

It’s just when Naomi’s bitterness and lack of hope have reached their bottom that the Good News of God begins to percolate to the surface.

Orpah and Ruth are offering Naomi another way of looking at family; it will be an odd kind of family in a traditional society, but it will be family. Naomi can’t see it; all she can see is the traditional nuclear family and that’s not what this is.

Again, how modern of this ancient book; the good news is offered in subversive social structures; let the listener consider.

“The hand of the Lord has turned against me,” Naomi says. At this point, Naomi has expressed the hope of the Lord for her daughters-in-law but she can’t, like Job or the Psalmist, talk *to* God about her own suffering.

Like many of us, she talks a lot *about* God but can’t quite make the connection to relating to God on a more personal level, and so, because this is natural to do, reads the bad things that have happened to her as God’s judgement though, as I said earlier, the author of the book never says this.

Orpah relents; she’s put on a brave face about going to a foreign land, but Naomi has convinced her that her home is her home. She does not make an inferior choice to Ruth.

She is a little like Naaman, the Syrian General who goes to Israel to get cleansed from his skin disease, comes to recognize Yahweh but then goes back to Syria or the wise men who travel from the East to acknowledge Jesus then return to the east where they are from.

Naomi blesses her to go and urges Ruth “your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods.”

But where Naomi seems mixed up and confused, Ruth is full of clarity; she will not be put off from going with Naomi: she is committed to Naomi, Naomi’s people and Naomi’s God. She is committed till “death do us part,” but even death won’t part her from these commitments! It’s extraordinary stuff, really.

Ruth is, I think, though I’ve never heard it preached, a powerful example of what it might mean to love God whole: heart, body, soul and mind as in the exchange in our gospel today.

To love God in a completely undivided way is to be undivided yourself and undivided in your faithfulness to those God has called you to be with and serve.

It is to be committed in this way that is the hallmark of the saints. On this great feast we remind ourselves of what is possible when God’s Spirit wells up within us and calls from us the commitment to live in the presence of the One, Holy and Undivided Trinity, in an undivided way in the midst of a fragmented, very divided culture.

Some might read Ruth’s story fairly conservatively: she’s sticking with what she knows; but in reality she exhibits what all the saints exhibit, “where to next God?”

Not in the context of “I need something new and exciting in my life in order to feel alive” but rather in the context of her undivided commitment.

When I look at this community, I understand that hard times, stuff that just happens because, even famine-like experiences are the regular lot of living at one time or another for us personally and for the community as a whole.

And yet none of us, like the scribe, are far from the Kingdom; Jesus is with us in this community, in the Word and at this table; but the question becomes, will we together, will we individually, like Ruth, take the risk to move from talking *about* God, *about* Christ, to fully committing *to* God; to loving God whole?

If we do, we will find, along with Ruth, St. Thomas and all the saints that all along, God has not been sitting idly by, but all along has been committed to us; has been loving us whole; to such a degree and with such whole-hearted compassion

that our sins became Christ’s sins; our place and time becomes the Spirit’s place and time and the “stuff that just happens” opens to us the possibility of fresh commitment.