

A Question of Motives
Sunday, November 8, In the Year of Our LORD, 2009
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 and Mark 12:38-44

Unless Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan awakens from his coma, someone discovers some of his writings or the blog purported to be his proves to indeed be his compositions, we may never know the motives behind the rampage that unfolded at Fort Hood earlier this week. People may draw conclusions from his past acts, from what he said or didn't say to others or from his behavior in the last weeks leading to what we understand was to be a deployment to Afghanistan. There are those, of course, who have already made up their mind as to his purposes because of his Palestinian background and the fact he considered himself a devout Muslim. Compounding the horror is the fact that while we know most Muslims are peace loving people, that affirmation does not resonate with so many people determined to cast suspicion on an entire group because of the extremism or idiocy of some.

We may never know or fully understand the motives that led to Maj. Hasan's apparent acts of murder and mayhem. Frankly, that begs a more profound question, as to whether we ever fully understand the motives behind any other person's behavior ... or whether we always understand what prompts us to do whatever we do in a given situation.

Clearly, when I chose a title for this morning's sermon back in October that it might be printed in the "Chimes" as part of the month's worship schedule, my ideas about motives and the rationales behind them were based on the two readings Dinah just shared so that we might reflect on the loving, giving and self-sacrificing motives of two women - and how their motives might serve as examples for us to celebrate and mirror as faithful people of God.

As brief as is the Book of Ruth, it presents a number of interesting themes and motifs that speak to us in the here and now. As ever, Scripture is both timeless and timely! In short, a man by the name of Elimelech, his Moabite wife, Naomi, and their two sons leave their home in Judah during a famine and seek refuge in Naomi's native land, Moab. The two sons marry Moabite women. Tragedy strikes. All three men die. Naomi determines to return to Judah and fully expects to go back alone. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, remains in Moab. There is no reason to find fault with Orpah's motives. Moab is, after all, her home. Ruth, on the other hand, shows unexpected devotion to this now bereft-of-all-family-woman, her mother-in-law, Naomi. Ruth's compassion and determination are apparently just part and parcel of her soul - and in what many consider the most ringing words in that "little" book of the Old Testament, Ruth pours out her words of love and grace with poignancy:

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 your God my God.

Ruth's motives appear to be heartfelt. As the rest of the story unfolds, we are presented with additional evidence that she is self-less, bows to the wishes of others, and is one of those wonderful human beings who goes about her life in humble, giving and modest ways. What makes her life so important in the annals of Jewish faith and history is that she is the great-grandmother of David. Indeed, for those Jews who grew to insist that the only "good" Jew was someone who was 100% Jewish and of an unblemished family line, the story of Ruth is a firm reminder that part of David's family tree had more than a few scarred "knots" in it and that any claim to the contrary fell short of the truth. Not incidentally, when one reads Jesus' genealogy as found in the first chapter of Matthew, the "cast of characters" includes some rather interesting personages whose behavior included incest, prostitution, adultery, murder, political intrigue ... ah, the pervasiveness of human failings! In those forty-two generations from Abraham to Jesus as found in the Gospel of Matthew, it is David who wins the dubious "award" for three of those sins - adultery with Bathsheba, the murder of her husband, Uriah, and political intrigue before, during and after his reign as the second King of Israel.

To the degree that Ruth is a named, identifiable, figure in religious history whose motives are so worthy of note, the opposite is true of another woman whose motives were worthy of mention by none other than Jesus of Nazareth but who is anonymous. This woman is the epitome people who go about their lives in humble, gracious, giving, ... and ... just to underscore the concluding theme ... thankful ways. The poor widow who gave the two coins despite the real possibility that they were all she had ... this poor widow whose giving was observed by Jesus and the disciples ... never knew she was being watched, much less that she would become a living lesson about motives, giving, faithfulness, dedication and service. Oh, the wealthy person, who wanted to be observed by his neighbors, friends and fellow citizens, the man who put a great deal of money into the treasury didn't know he was the object of Jesus' lesson either - but the point is that what we do, how we do it, and to the extent that we do what we do for the sake of our ego or our sense of self or how others will view us – perhaps we need to remember that it is hard to hide motives that are less than pure, less than that of God, less than that of the truly faithful.

Until the killing at Fort Hood at the end of the week pushed the credulity meter beyond the imagination, the story that caught my eye was that of the couple in Arizona, Keith and Stacey King, who, over a period of who knows how long, walked away with something approaching 1,000 bags of luggage from the airport in Phoenix. That caught my eye because a year ago June, Sally and I flew through that airport on our way to visit her brother's family in Tucson. This instance requires no speculation. The motive in this instance was "simple" theft. Neighbors to the King family report they thought it interesting how the King family was able to have so many garage sales - but the arrogance, avarice, greed! Earlier this week, that seemed to be the timely example of less than pure motives - until Maj. Hasan managed to put a story about stolen suitcases (and how many prescription bottles were in those suitcases - medicines we can assume were important to a large number of persons) - well, that story went to the proverbial "back burner."

When it comes to what motivates humans, we need to look at the whole spectrum – from the comparatively mundane and pedestrian to the horrific, from the unusual to the commonplace – and recognize how humans with their unfettered desires, *supposed* needs and on occasion selfish motivations drive them (us) to do – whatever. When it comes to Ruth and the unnamed widow in our reading from the Gospel of Mark, the *reason* their motives were more pure is that it

apparently never occurred to either of those two ladies that *they* were the center of their universe. Indeed, as persons of faith, it never occurred to them that anything other than the Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God was most important and at the center of their being. Their motives were admirable because they were directed outward – away from self. But there is far more to this than a matter of perspective.

Neither woman was wealthy. Both women experienced less than ideal circumstances in their lives. We know Ruth was a young widow. We have no idea how long the anonymous woman was widowed. We do know that in that day and age, to be widowed often put one lower on both the economic and social ladders of the time. A widow's future was dependent either on finding another husband or on the largess of the religious community. And, when it comes to the religious community, ... maybe you didn't catch the significance in the first part of the reading from Mark – I read it again:

Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. *They devour widows' houses* and for a show make lengthy prayers. ...

Great! In other words, in addition to the economic situation brought about by the death of their husbands, widows could count on being victimized by the very people one would expect would help them! Nevertheless, despite their less than ideal lot in life, we have every reason to believe these two women went about their daily routine with *thankful* hearts, with a life marked by *thanksgiving*. Oh, I don't mean they smiled if not danced through the hours of their days undoubtedly marked by a hard routine if not drudgery. To live in a way and manner marked by thankfulness to God for some of the simpler blessings of life does not come about because life is necessarily blissful, but from knowing, no matter our circumstances, that each of us belongs to God, are made in the image of our Creator. That means that we are to be ever about doing God's business here on earth, finding ways, even in the harder moments, to be creative, redemptive and empowering. Yes, those words, spelled with capital letters, may be how we speak of our God – but they are also part and parcel of who and what you and I are called to be and do – to, no matter what, be bearers of the good news of God's love for all people, to find ways to redeem all that is broken, all that is in need of reconciliation or in need to reclamation, from broken relationships to broken hearts, from embracing those who know grief or hurt or depression or loss to loving the earth and all of the resources therein, to finding ways by which our motives are defined by what is loving, peaceable, hopeful, gracious, good and worthy.

There will be plenty of times to sit back and ponder the motives of the Maj. Hasans of the world who use weaponry to affront our senses or Keith and Stacey King of Arizona and their theft of nearly a thousand suitcases who bring shame to the name of humanity. This morning is a time to name those ill conceived motives and then celebrate the alternative that shouts to us from across the ages – the motives of two widows, one named and one anonymous – who give evidence of a different path, one that mirrors the good news of our God as expressed most perfectly in Jesus of Nazareth. It is from Ruth, the unnamed widow and Jesus I choose to take my cues. It is from them we learn of better motives, a better way of being, and how we might bring honor to human life – especially when it mirrors the ways of our God.

Amen.