

RUTH 3:1-5; 4:13-17  
PSALM 127  
HEBREWS 9:24-28  
MARK 12:38-44

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
November 4, 2021; Year B

### ***All In!***

**“All in!” It is a ubiquitous catch phrase that indeed seems to be universally used in a whole variety of contexts! “All in” is right up there with “game changer,” “inflection point,” “revolutionary,” and perhaps my new favorite, describing college athletes who have decided that they want to uncommit and change schools and teams, “transfer portal!” Folks, we are all in the transfer portal! Based on recent experience, I know that I am! From Chris Hayes’ nightly news and opinion show on MSNBC, *All In with Chris Hayes*, to every imaginable opportunity to give full and absolute commitment to any pursuit or passion, “All In” is all the rage! Go big or go home! Perhaps we need these catch phrases because we have all been desensitized after two plus years of COVID protocols and a political landscape that has been nothing less than absurd. Nothing seems outrageous anymore! Everything seems larger than life. It takes a lot to move us, to get and maintain our attention, the span of which seems to be getting shorter and shorter with every passing day. And as I read today’s lections, it occurred to me very quickly that today’s scripture lessons are all about being “All in!” Neither was it lost on your very new pastor, very excited and immensely overwhelmed by the challenges of moving and every other logistical nightmare I have recently faced, that I am “All in” with you, as hopefully, you are “All in” with me! Yes, here we are! What a commitment we have made and are making to one another, an emerging covenantal relationship now in its most fragile, embryonic stage. The slate is clean as we get to know one another, intimately, personally, in every sacred way that pastors and people come to relate to one another. It is always risky**

**and rewarding business. For me, for now, “All in” is all about housing. As the boll weevil song goes, “Got to have a home!” The Psalmist today declares, “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain!” This pronouncement is a reminder to all of us that we are not alone in this holy enterprise striving to embody the best of holiest exercises, ritually and otherwise, as we seek to build and nurture beloved faith community. No, we believe that we are not alone because by faith we believe that there is a mysterious presence delightfully lurking in the wings, hidden in so many ways but mysteriously available in the shadows, guiding all we hope and long to do together. Indeed, God is always “All in” with all of us in everything we seek to accomplish in life. And so it is with pastor and people.**

Today, we are privileged to read some rather captivating stories, interestingly and intriguingly all having some commonality that we would never have begun to consider had those magical, mystical lectionary editors not carefully paired these texts together, creatively juxtaposing them one with another for our consideration as we have the privileged opportunity to examine and explore their content every three years when they dutifully come our way again, amazingly returning to us as if for the first time. I love this stuff! I live for this stuff! The careful planning by those magical, mystical lectionary editors in the wisdom of their cyclical, textual paradigm, is why I am a lectionary preacher, captive to its demanding discipline, bound and determined, yes hellbent, to see where these captivating narratives might take me, and perhaps more importantly, along with what I expect to be a most attentively listening congregation. After all, despite my doing all the talking, call it a soliloquy or a monologue, this sermonic exercise is very much a congregational conversation. The inherent challenge presented in this homiletical process is to never waver, to never vacillate, to never even be remotely tempted to choose an alternate, perhaps easier, route, when the texts simply do not seem to speak a relevant word or resonate in any way whatsoever, but to remain faithful to a specific

sermonic enterprise that hopefully leads to desired results. So, with all that being said, let's take a journey together through these ancient texts and see what might be lurking within them for our time, our circumstances and situations, the scenarios that order our lives in the living of these days.

**We begin our travels today with the wonderful love story that constitutes the Book of Ruth, a narrative designed to directly address, to confront, prejudice, xenophobia, and the kinds of inbred nationalistic tendencies that were threatening the loving purposes designed to empower the Israelite people, revealing their ultimate destiny as they related to the myriad multicultural neighbors with whom they would encounter and engage, those with whom they would interact, or as we like to say, to “interface” up close and personal. Yes, let us clearly acknowledge for the record that the Book of Ruth boldly advocates for acceptance and affirmation. It is an open and affirming narrative, a document confronting what was among all tribes and clans a very insular and closed cultural milieu. The plot in this love story is simply the occasion setting the stage for the real issue at stake that was surely haunting the Israelite people. You all know the story well. Ruth and her counterpart Orpah had married outsiders, people the Hebrew Bible pegged as aliens, further describing them in detail as foreigners or strangers, the kinds of people encountered by the always suspicious, even somewhat paranoid, Israelites during and after their destructive conquest of the land of Canaan, extermination often their sadistic goal, all carried out under the supposed blessing and sanction of a benign or a blatantly supportive God. Yes, this land flowing with milk and honey they believed, presumed, was their divine right, their version of manifest destiny, an entitlement they assumed and equated with what came to be known as the Promised Land, indeed an abundantly overflowing land full of much promise. Ruth and Orpah, daughters-in-law of Naomi, an Israelite, became widowed just as their mother-in-law had.**

**What to do? What to do? In Naomi's mind, the only suitable solution was to return from Moab, back to her country of origin, back to her native ancestral land in Israel. Orpah and Ruth obediently followed, but Naomi would have none of it, imploring them to return to the land of their people, the origin of their birth, where surely, they would receive succor and sustenance. Orpha complied, heeding Naomi's sound advice, but Ruth stubbornly remained steadfast in her faithfulness to this woman who she had come to consider, who was now defacto next of kin, following Naomi back to Bethlehem, causing quite a stir upon their entry into this noteworthy town. It is at this point in the story where we get that beautiful and familiar soliloquy by Ruth that has become a common Bible reading at weddings. "Entreat me not to leave you. . . ." Brings a tear to the eye!**

**Anyway, here they were, two widows alone in a place that by and large did not know how to receive them or care for them, a societal system in many ways ill-equipped to a large degree. Now folks, whenever we see the phrase "widows and orphans" in the Hebrew Bible, these dispossessed persons metaphorically and really represent an archetype, defining any who live on the margins, any who are disenfranchised, cast to the fringes of society, marked accordingly. Duly noted! The Hebrew Bible reminds its reader of the call to dutifully observe the ancient practice of hospitality, to render a custom revealed not only ritually, but practically as a mandatory requirement freely offered to the frail and fragile who live in the shadows, not knowing if and when, or from who and where, they would get a next meal. The same rubrics went for aliens, foreigners, and strangers. You will hear a lot about biblical and theological hospitality in the coming years! Hint! It ain't about restaurants and hotels, the proverbial "hospitality industry!" So, here they are, two widowed women, deprived and devoid of life's basic necessities, the life-sustaining provisions that all people who are fortunate or lucky,**

some would call it “blessed” enough to take for granted, you know, folks like you and me.

Naomi, ironically fulfilling the plotting and planning tendencies of an over-functioning mother-in-law, some would suggest, strongly stereotyping here, embracing a meddlesome Jewish matriarchal tendency, hatches a perfect plan. You see, in this time it was customary for those who harvested a field to leave some gleanings for the poor. It was a direct way for the landowner to honor the God who provided and to provide for the needy. Good practice! Every day, Ruth would go down to the threshing floor and gather the goods, making sure she and Naomi could eat for the day. Think of the rubrics regarding the daily collection of manna in the wilderness way back when! Well, it turns out that Boaz stayed on sight, camping out in his tent in close proximity to the next day’s gathering. Naomi thinks to herself, if I could hook Ruth up with Boaz, we would all be set for life! Now, it is important to point out that Boaz had already noticed Ruth coming to the field and had inquired about her, no doubt taking a shine to this un-betrothed maiden who had appeared out of seemingly nowhere. He gives her specific instructions that she should not go glean in another man’s field. Not only did he suggest that it was not safe, not at all the prudent thing to do, but he clearly was already at least somewhat smitten, a little twitterpated, and had his eyes on the prize! I sense a Soap Opera developing here! A bit flirty and manipulative, me thinks! But as they say, whoever they is, “all is fair in love and war!”

Surely, the busybody but intuitive, most perceptive, Naomi notices these same goings on! She needs to speed up the process! Time’s a wastin’! She comes up with a most clever plan, a brilliant idea. Let’s skip all the formalities, no dating, no getting to know you, no romance, no flowers, no wine, no candy, no Hallmark moment, no, none of it. Naomi approaches her daughter-in-law. Tells Ruth to bathe

and get pretty and perfumed and go down to Boaz's tent. She tells all this with much detail. Ruth was a woman who, by the way, I must remind you had once been married and knew her way around the block regarding matters of the heart, not to mention the boudoir. Naomi carefully instructs Ruth to lie down next to Boaz and uncover his feet! Now I must remind you, warn you perhaps, that in many places within the biblical narrative, "feet" is a euphemism for other body parts. I am going to leave it to your imagination as to which parts because it is my first Sunday and I would like to have a second one! In every case, it is up to the reader to determine when feet are feet and when they are not! This is always an inherent challenge in biblical exegesis and interpretation! We then find what I consider one of the funniest, most hysterical, lines in all the Bible, "he will tell you what to do!" You think? You bet he will! Years ago, when I was still doing my thing in the liberal Baptist tradition, I attended a UCC stewardship conference. My good friend, Nancy Hastings Sehested, another Alliance of Baptist preacher, delivered the sermon that evening. It was during the time when Southern Baptists had initiated the "True Love Waits" campaign to discourage premarital sex among young people. Yes, they would even sign an abstinence pledge! Nancy chose this text from Ruth for her sermon and dared include a line for the ages, "Sometimes, true love doesn't wait!" I absolutely lost it, as did a few of my in-the-know colleagues who were also in attendance that evening. Nobody from the predominantly UCC contingent laughed, however, because they were not aware of the ongoing crusade taking place within Southern Baptist Convention world. Poor Nancy! She had accidentally told an insider joke! But it was priceless! That night, Ruth went "All in", literally and figuratively. Sometimes you just got to go for it, yes, to go big or go home, to cast your proverbial bread on the water, risk it all, and see what happens, hoping and praying for a certain result, a real reward, an ending that might possibly become the epic stuff of myth and legend and even fairy tales. Yes indeed, Ruth and Boaz subsequently got married and everybody lived happily

**ever after! How romantic! What a love story! Ruth, an outsider, a non-Israelite, would even become a progenitor in the birth genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew's feminist version. Not a bad legacy for an alien, a foreigner, a stranger!**

**In today's Gospel lection from Mark today, we read of another "All in" episode, but a scenario that is much less scandalous, much less salaciously titillating. In this vignette we find Jesus seated outside the Temple, watching people who stop and willingly put their money into the treasury. He observed a variety of people coming and going, each putting into the giant trumpet-like receptacles various amounts of money, but specifically noting the large contributions donated by the rich. But of all the myriad people who came and went, each one making their offering, Jesus took note of a poor widow, the kind of powerless person he had just previously accused the scribes of devouring, a reminder that women, widows in particular, were not allowed the luxury of ownership and would usually lose everything they enjoyed, but really were never entitled to ownership, if their husband were to unfortunately precede them in death. This, my friends, is why this text is paired by the lectionary gurus with the Book of Ruth! This poor widow puts in two small copper coins, the proverbial two cents' worth, worth about a penny. Jesus uses her act of generosity as a teachable moment, an object lesson for the ages. He dares to suggest that she, out of an insanely disproportionate abundance, has put in more than anyone that day because she gave all she had. Yes, she went "All in!" Skeptics and cynics would suggest that the pittance of money she possessed would not buy anything of substance anyway, and so she might as well give all of it. Yes, that is certainly true from a pedestrian, pragmatic perspective. But Jesus knew better. In his incredibly intuitive way, he saw right through her, the same way he seemed to see through any and everybody, good and bad, and everywhere in between. In her simple, unrehearsed, act, what she assumed as routine, ordinary, obedience, he saw to be an**

**extraordinary act of grace. It was a gift unsurpassed in a system that continues in so many ways to contribute, unfortunately mirroring and modeling our own institutional demands, an oft debilitating slavery we cannot escape as long as we are beholden to buildings and staff and all the other churchly accoutrement that we have come to associate with local church and that we vainly hope will feed our spiritual needs, the longings of our hearts. And yes, I like getting a paycheck, knowing that I am a large, significant part of this ecclesial juggernaut of systemic substance we call Church! These are the lessons that none of us should ever forget as we live within the confines, dictated by the parameters, even as we strive to stretch the boundaries somewhat controlled and definitely guided by our complex and oft ever-growing organizational necessities and realities.**

**The final piece to solving our lectionary puzzle and completing our homiletical journey this morning is found in the epistle of Hebrews' understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus as a sacrificial offering, the ultimate unblemished, perfect, lamb, to atone for our sins. Now while I do not buy into any of that substitutionary atonement nonsense, believing it to be a perverse interpretation of the ancient sacrificial system employed by the Israelites as they slaughtered countless animals to atone for their sins and appease an angry, punishing and vengeful deity. I am profoundly moved by the idea of the way that Jesus was "All in" when it came to his values, his bedrock beliefs, his understanding of the faith that formed him from his birth when it came to the way he died. Jesus died standing up for the things he believed, his convictions, his defining principles, the very integrity of his being, always with his biblical and theological understanding that loving God meant loving neighbor and even self, that "no matter who you were or where you were on life's journey, you were welcome" in his realm, a realm representing the very realm of God. Jesus never compromised his integrity, never selling his soul on the open market like a commodity to be traded as such. He was uniquely authentic,**



**genuine in every respect, a clarity of humanity very unlike the characteristics that drive most of us human beings in our desperate and vain attempts at survival. He literally lived each day as if it were his last because he knew each one very well could be. Yes, he was “All in” for his God and “All in” for every person, everyone created *imago Dei*, in the very image of the Creator. No one mattered more than another, more than anyone else. That embrace drove his mantra, defined his ethic, his moral compass! And it is in pursuing that life image that we gather and attempt to build beloved faith community, bringing his gospel, the gospel, to everyone we encounter, praying that this level of love, shown in acts of compassion and caring, grace, mercy, and peace, will spread far beyond our walls and the confines of the North Woods. Therein is our goal. Therein is our hope. Therein is our mission and ministry. It is that simple! It is that complicated! And that, my friends, is enough for now!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is “All in” with all of us all the time. Amen and amen!**