

## **Matthew 25:34-40**

<sup>34</sup> Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup> And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' <sup>40</sup> And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, <sup>[g]</sup> you did it to me.'

## **Ruth 1:1-17**

**1** In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. <sup>2</sup> The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. <sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May

the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup>The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. <sup>10</sup>They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." <sup>11</sup>But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, <sup>13</sup>would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

<sup>15</sup>So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said,

"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.

<sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!"

## **Amanda's Ordination**

### **"Like a Feather on the Breath of God"**

**Texts: Matthew 25:34-40, Ruth 1:1-17**

**Kerra Becker English**

When was it we did that? It seems the righteous are surprised that the King is about to reward and bless them, so they ask, "When was it that we saw you as a stranger and welcomed you, or hungry and fed you, or naked and gave you clothes, or sick or in prison and visited you?" In this story, Jesus acts like they genuinely don't know. They don't know that it was him all along, or someone standing in for him, or that helping the other is genuinely doing his work here on earth. It's in the not-knowing, the not-caring about the differences, the not-mattering of who needs our help that seems to make the difference when it comes to God's judgment.

You see, in the flip side of that story, the accursed don't know what got them into trouble either, but rather than offering a hand, they turn aside from those who are unlike them. They turn a blind eye to despair. They refuse to share what they have with the poor. They assume the prisoners deserve what they're getting. And strangers remain untouchable.

Is it any wonder that Amanda feels this text as part of her call to ministry to this place and this time? Christ broke into this world to proclaim such a message from every mountaintop and to preach such a message to any wounded person who would listen, and it's a message we continually need to hear. We who put our faith in Christ need the reminder that any time that we serve the "least of these" we do so to Jesus in disguise. This is the calling of chaplaincy, each and every day, as Jesus appears in all kinds of disguises. Some of them, guaranteed, will be real doozies!

I've known all along that I wasn't called to the unpredictability of hospital chaplaincy. I much prefer the familiarity of the devil that I know in the church. But Amanda, I think, will make it work. It starts by knowing how you were once a stranger, and Jesus welcomed you. The righteous get it. Jesus collected the outsiders, the misfits, the ones that culturally didn't quite meet all the requirements, and invited them to wholeness and gave them permission to own their own humanity. Amanda has been an active voice on her seminary campus for women and for the queer community because she knows what it is like to find herself inhabiting the skin that is seen as "other." To embrace one's whole humanity as a queer woman takes courage, but in Christ's kingdom, it can't stop there. It begins with recognizing your own outsider-ness and allowing Jesus to welcome you anyway. But then it steps into solidarity with other groups who have been neglected, oppressed, or abused in our world. Amanda also became a quick study in African-American theology and a strident supporter of the Black Lives movement, positioning herself with colleagues at demonstrations around Richmond's racist monuments to Confederate generals to proclaim God's message of love, not hate. Then the next step of maturing into this text is the hardest one, the one that Jesus makes even more abundantly clear from his sermon on a mountaintop. He says that his followers will also grow to love their enemies. The enemies, the accursed ones, perhaps even the ones who would deny humanity to those who are different.

This is the challenge of chaplaincy, one that you will no doubt find here in both the wild and wonderful, and stressed and depressed mountains of West Virginia. You see, Morgantown, being where the University is, is the go-to hospital for nearly all of West Virginia and parts of rural Pennsylvania as well. When folks come to you, it's going to be serious, and expensive, and likely painful. But these are the people who have also listened to the call of the mountains. They will be formed by the age and the beauty of the ancient Appalachians. These aren't the relatively

new high-peaked, “look-at-us” mountains of the Rockies. No, they are the worn and weathered part of the same chain of mountains that you know from your North Carolina home. These are the mountains that have seen it all, and these are the people who have watched their beloved mountains exploited by greed and tainted by pollution. They have counted on the coal beneath them and the tourism that brings people through but not to stay. They have also watched the jobs that fed their families for generations evaporate with nothing new to fill the void. They are frustrated by recent political promises that have left them destitute. Nevertheless, they are filled with hope by the wildness and wonder that has endured. You will be meeting stranger after stranger and yet, you will discover that these are your people. How do I know? I know because these are my people too. My whole ministry has been Appalachian – other than my Ashland ministry – which happens to share the peculiar similarity of drawing together people who have faced the worst and continued to have hope.

But when people are stressed, and cancer certainly brings out the stress, you might not know what you will be getting behind door number 203. Will this door opened find someone filled with despair and frustration? Or someone who has developed a keen sense of resilience? Will they be ready to receive your care? Or will they be cranky and hostile – very enemy like? That’s when your faithfulness comes into play. Seeing each and every person you meet as a beloved child of God – and worthy of your care – that’s what the righteous do – and in so doing – they meet Jesus, time and time again.

Amanda, reflecting on these texts you selected for today has also reminded me of the wild and varied ministry of someone I already think of as one of your personal saints, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard created space for other women, she nurtured a healing ministry with her cultivation of natural remedies that science has researched and been surprised really work. She spoke truth to power, and often got reprimands for it, for herself and for her whole community – but it was always because she was aiming at improvements that others didn't want to admit were necessary. She critiqued the church, often, for its dryness and lukewarmness. And, as I'm sure you know by now, suffering people facing their own mortality don't want to be bored or placated by the tired old sayings the church frequently has to offer. Here, they will want to be reminded of what their mountains have taught them about endurance. They will want to know what Jesus has to speak to them directly. They will want to be comforted by someone who has been there and come through to the other side. In Matthew Fox's book about Hildegard, he says that Hildegard taught that the only sin was "drying up" and she wrote to multiple church officials criticizing their dryness, telling them to get out of their buildings and do whatever it took to get "wet and green and moist and juicy." (p.4) Yes, I know to our ears that sounds vaguely naughty, naturalistic, and fundamentally queer. So, whether you choose to filter your words more like Hildegard or with a bit more Presbyterian restraint, you are exactly the person to revive that message. You have the power of your Saint behind you to remind people that the life lived in the Spirit is fertile soil, mountain energy, and offers gifts far greater than they ever thought possible.

But there will be plenty of church and hospital official types who will preach to you that this is a weighty calling and that you must take it painfully seriously, and keep it as dry and boring as possible. Indeed, it is a high calling to be Ordained by the church and take on the mantle of ministry. And yet, even in her prolific work as an abbess who has become a Doctor of

the Church, Hildegard was known to admonish others to: “Live like a feather on the breath of God.”

This is where I turn to the words exchanged between Ruth and Naomi. Ruth is that quintessential feather. Where you go, I will go. Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people. She allows the Spirit to take her where it will. That isn't easy to do in ministry either. The human ego wants more control than that. But I dare say that it was Ruth's incredible moxie that allowed at all for her to defy Naomi's original wish and say, “I'm going with you. That settles it.” In order to be blown about by God, she first had to defy the role the world defined for her.

You see, as biblical scholar Carolyn Custis James, refreshingly talks about new vistas in the book of Ruth, she observes that both Ruth and Naomi were sufficiently zero's in their society. Both were widows, childless, even more importantly son-less, and Ruth would be an immigrant if she followed Naomi back to Bethlehem where they were just beginning to recover from famine. But since, she had absolutely NOTHING going for her, so she was willing to take the risk.

And then, here is the fun part. When we have been winnowed down to our very last hope and choose to put that hope in God, that's when, every time, in the stories the Bible dares to tell, God looks at humankind, winks at the angels, and says, “Watch this. Hold my beer.”

God takes these two women who were as marginal as they come, as barren as they could be, thirsty, desolate, and out of options, and works through them and their “nothing left to lose” courage to place them squarely in the lineage of King David, and following that to be recorded

by Matthew in the genealogy of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Their ancestral spirit continues through those who would follow Christ in his unending love for the “least of these” today.

Amanda, you have taken on an incredible calling. It takes courage to put all your trust in God, but I have seen you pray, and listen, and wait for God’s movement but not without the same moxie that was in Ruth to defy borders and boundaries of your own. Live like a feather on the breath of God. And let the wind that has shaped these mountains also shape you. Amen.