

## "Threads Woven Together"

Ruth 1:11-16; Matthew 20:29-34

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 8, 2018 – 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Today ties up the end of a long holiday weekend marking our independence as a country. At its core it is really more than the birthday of a nation. It's the establishment of an ideal—a land dedicated to freedom and liberty from its outset.

Now, as we know, a good intention doesn't always guarantee its intended outcome. Both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution express high aspirations and we are striving yet toward those lofty goals. We're far from perfect, but that doesn't mean we have failed. We are still working to achieve our full potential as a nation.

The flag, which we see so prominently displayed this time of year, is the visible symbol of our country and what it stands for. If the stripes in the flag represent the original thirteen colonies and the stars stand for the states of the union, then I would say that the thousands of threads woven together to give it form are the individual citizens that make up its whole.

So if one of those threads stands for you, then as it extends its length it crosses, and is crossed, by thousands of others. The strength of a country is not dependent on just a few individuals; it needs everyone to take a rightful place, engage in democracy building, and be interconnected with all others.

In this way a flag is like life itself: our lives touch, and are touched, by countless others as they go through their span. We don't live in isolation, nor would we want to. Sometimes lives cross in the most unexpected of ways, and certain contacts are decisive as they shape our personal futures.

The people in our scriptures today are like those threads. Each one of them was an individual life, complete unto itself; but each was also a life that crossed others, and that made the crucial difference.

Take Ruth. She was a young woman who met a young man. She was from Moab; he from Judah. His family had come to her country during a time of famine. It was then that they met. In time her mother-in-law, Naomi, is widowed and then loses both her sons, one of which was Ruth's husband.

But you know the familiar story from there: the famine is over, Naomi desires to go back to her own people, she encourages her daughters-in-law to stay, but Ruth refuses. Her life has become thoroughly intertwined with Naomi, and she says, "Don't ask me to leave you! Let me go with you. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God my God." The lives of Naomi and Ruth touched in so profound a way that they were both bound together no matter would the future had in store.

Something similar takes place in our Gospel reading, though the circumstances are rather different. This is the story of two blind men sitting beside a well-traveled road. It doesn't

specifically say that they were seeking alms, but it's implied by their location. When they hear from the crowd that Jesus is passing by, they shout to him: "Have mercy on us...let our eyes be opened."

Our story tells us that Jesus responds with compassion. He reaches out and touches them, and they are instantly healed. The text then ends with what might be considered an afterthought, "...and they followed him." I don't think that's incidental, but central to the recollection. Jesus makes such a decided impact on them that they now put their lives alongside Christ's and go with him. Lives crossing lives intertwined in the most unexpected of ways.

Some years back my life crossed that of another in such a way that both our lives were touched profoundly. It started at a Columbus antique show with a large box of old letters. Most bore the same handwriting and were addressed to the same person. I took one from the stack, postmarked 1919, and read it. It was a love letter, and so was another, and another after that. So, being easily drawn to sentiment, I bought the whole batch.

There were over two hundred items in the box and they spanned the years 1890 to 1933. Some were in other handwriting and from different postmarks. Most of the correspondence, however, was between David and Edwina, sweethearts from long ago. Many of the letters were written before they were married, but others came afterward. There were also letters to them from their parents, and even some later notes that David and Edwina's children sent back home when they were away during the summers. Three generations of correspondence all packed into an old cardboard box.

With each letter I read I became increasingly drawn into the Dellinger family, and all their joys and struggles. I remembered that the dealer had said she had more letters back at her house and to call if I was interested. I did, and soon I had a second batch of old items almost as large as the first. In this batch were also diplomas and other family keepsakes. Nothing, however, after 1933. I wondered what happened that year to cause everything to stop so suddenly?

Most of the letters originated in Seneca County, a hundred miles from here. At one time David and Edwina were both students at Heidelberg University in Tiffin. By chance I had an upcoming denominational meeting on campus that summer, so I thought I'd do some investigating while there.

The first thing I did when I arrived was to go to the library to see if I could locate the 1919 yearbook. And there they both were—Edwina and David. After you've read the intimate letters of people, you have a real curiosity to know what they look like.

Next thing I did was to find that Edwina was buried at Bloomville, about ten miles from Tiffin. Strangely, there was no listing for David in county records. So on to the cemetery where I located where Edwina was buried. Next to her name on the stone was David's name. Quite surprisingly, his date indicated he had died only the year before at the age of 96. While I was standing there, a cemetery worker came up.

"Family?"

“No, but you could say that I’m acquainted with them.”

“Coming to the service?”

“I’m not sure,” I stammered.

“Yep, in two weeks. Daughter’s bringing his ashes from out West somewhere. Held off until the weather got better in the spring. Guess if you want details you can talk to the local funeral home. They’re makin’ the arrangements.”

I talked with the funeral home director and, coming back to Columbus, I now had the phone number of a 71-year-old woman in Princeton, California, the oldest of Edwina and David’s children. I also knew if I made contact with her, I might feel I would have to give up the letters though, legally, they belonged to me now.

So how do you call up someone and tell them you have their family history in the closet of your back room? I could imagine hearing her hanging up the phone in my ear. I would have if someone had called me with such a tale.

After several days of indecision I finally dialed the number. A woman with a pleasant voice answered. I quickly told her that I was a minister from Ohio and that, if she’d bear with me, I’d like to read her something from a letter I found. I proceeded to do that but before I even got halfway, she interrupted, “That letter is from me. I wrote it home from camp when I was ten years old.” And so she did.

Well, that day two strangers talked for more than an hour and I shared many passages from other letters I had. It was apparent that I knew things about her parents that even she was not aware of. She explained to me that her family had moved out West during the Depression in 1933 and much had to be left behind in Ohio. After a while the separated items were just forgotten.

Toward the end of our conversation Mary said to me, “As you know I’m bringing back my dad’s ashes week after next. We’re Episcopalian, and I’ve been unable to locate a rector there to conduct the service. You’ve read all those letters from my dad and it’s like you know him. I wonder if you might consider doing his funeral?”

So, ten days later, in the gentle rain of a country morning, with Mary and her nephew and a handful of others, I led a service for a man whose letters from long ago I found by chance in a box.

Now over 300 letters and papers were been returned to where they belong. Mary and I had our own correspondence built out of friendship until she died a few years ago. There was a real feeling of family between the two of us. She said to me more than once, “God’s hand is in this.” Well, maybe.

One day I happened to mention this most unlikely story to a member at a former church. He said, “Well, that’s quite interesting because I grew up in that little town of Bloomville and my brother bought the Dellinger farm.” What’s the odds of that? I guess Mary was on to something about this not being so much a chance happening after all!

Our scriptures today, and even personal experience, tell us how people are constantly brought together under improbable and unlikely circumstances. Our lives can, and do, cross others in significant ways. We never know when this will happen, but we must be ready then to seize on the moment.

It's easy to pass by somebody and feel no connection, but in reality we are each one thread in the fabric of life. The next person you see is perhaps but a friend you've yet to meet. I wonder how many opportunities we have lost by routinely disregarding another as if he or she could be of no possible importance to us? How many times have we let possibilities come and then so quickly slip away?

Threads woven together as in a fabric. Naomi and Ruth, the two blind men and Jesus, Mary and Ron. Don't close yourself off to people who may yet come your way. Who can guess where lives will someday intersect? Our single thread of life has touched, and will touch, many others. And of those significant persons we've encountered along the way thus far, and may yet in the future, who's to say that God's hand isn't in it?