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Remembrance Day Sunday - 08-Nov-2015

We are the Witnesses

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be a witness, O God, to your Way of love, justice and faithful walking with us. Amen.

Scriptures: Ruth 4:1-11

Since coming to Canada from the USA in 1997, I've had the opportunity to attend Remembrance Day ceremonies in Edmonton, Ottawa and the small rural Quebec towns in which I previously served as a minister. Whether in a big city with thousands attending, or in a small village with a few gathered around a cenotaph, I find these occasions to be deeply moving. It always leaves me feeling as if I was on holy ground, and wanting per the custom of old to remove my shoes.

Let me share one such experience. Danford Lake, Quebec is as small a town as they come. Set in the beautiful Gatineau Hills of West Quebec, the community of about 200 souls not too long ago erected a stone monument to commemorate and honour those who had served. They started an annual ceremony, on the 11th day at the 11th hour, and despite their small size, a squadron from the 23rd Regiment based at Petawawa agreed to be present to help them honour their veterans and war dead.

Well my God if it didn't turn out nearly every year that Nov 11 was the day of a first snow squall, or certainly of cold and wind. The bone penetrating dampness, the drizzle, flurries or chill, never seemed to dampen the spirits of the 50 or so people that came. Two veterans would be given the honour of lowering the flags as the last post was played, including a man aged 90, standing tall in his beret and blue jacket ablaze with medals. The crowd would form a large semi-circle around the cenotaph, many in the front row holding papers that contained the names they would later

read aloud of loved ones, family members, neighbours, who had died – veterans all who had served their country, King and Queen.

As the ceremony unfolded, I was struck by the presence of the soldiers. Smartly turned out in green dress uniforms, shiny black shoes and trademark berets, these men and women marched as one body, one unit, and stood as still and tall as anything I had ever seen before. Despite the conformity of their appearance, I was struck by their youth, by the individuality of their faces, and by a sense of duty and pride in their discipline that gave me pause. I was also struck by the honour guard of four soldiers who stood silently at the corners of the cenotaph, rifles at their side, heads slightly tilted, eyes looking down, reminding me of figures at prayer – a link between the living and the dead. They didn't move a muscle, despite snowflakes tickling their faces or the drip of a runny nose. My heart stirred in awe, and in fear, as I witnessed their sacrifice of comfort to honour those who had served and died. As these were the years during the war in Afghanistan, I offered my prayers for their then dangerous and uncertain future.

Friends, like these four soldiers, as people of biblical faith it must be part of our heritage and training too to honour the dead. We also must honour the lives of those who sacrifice much in order to bring about justice in an often conflictive and warring world. In this, Boaz, the kinsmen of Naomi, and Ruth, her daughter-in-law might serve as an example for us of devotion to if not king and country, then to God. Boaz and Ruth become the equivalents of a hero or she-ro! Why? Because although we rightly dismiss the ancient worldview that held women to be the property of men, where women had no standing in their own right except for their relationships to fathers, husbands or sons, we yet encounter in this reading an ancient form of justice making.

You see, although under no obligation to redeem the Moabite widow named Ruth, Boaz does so for several reasons. First, in the chapters preceding our passage, Boaz is struck by the “chesed” -- the steadfast quality of Ruth's love and devotion to his kinswoman Naomi. You'll remember from last week that Ruth sacrificed her chance to stay home, marry again, and live by her own people and gods. Secondly, Boaz feels duty bound to pursue for Ruth and Naomi the right to secure their inheritance. At issue is the field owned by Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech; with no sons or grandsons to pass it on to, the land would pass out of Elimelech's line, and his name would be cut off from the living. As near next-of-kin, Boaz had the potential to fulfill the custom of levirate marriage, in which he would take Ruth as his wife, and produce heirs in the name of her dead husband Mahlon to secure that family line, and the inheritance that came with it. Boaz could have said no, as did the other unnamed next-of-kin in the story. Boaz was under no obligation, other than his sense of duty, and the “chesed” way in which he is depicted as living a righteous,

compassionate life. Jewish friends today would call Boaz a “*mensch*” – a Yiddish word meaning a very wise, just and good person. He goes out of his way to protect the vulnerable women and turn their situation around from one of emptiness and death into one of new abundance and new life.

Today here in church, and on Weds. on the 11th day of the 11th month and the 11th hour, so too do we engage in an exercise of holy redemption. By our remembering the horror of war, we honour the memories of those who fought and those who died. We honour their sacrifices even as we pray no other generation will be asked to take up sword or gun to kill and risk being killed. We look into the downcast faces of the honor guard; we look into the grieved faces of the families arrayed around a cenotaph in a small Quebec village, or amid the pomp of the national service in Ottawa. With them we yearn for a new realm of peace with justice that can begin to heal the rifts, set free the captives and raise the dead to new life, even as Boaz’s selfless act raised the name of the dead man Mahlon, his mother Naomi and widow Ruth back into the land of the living.

To make our pledge this morning to be partners in such a coming redemption of the world, I propose we follow the ancient custom referred to in Ruth’s story. In those days, to seal a business transaction, the one party would take off his sandal and give it to the other. So as an act of solidarity with those who have died, and as a witness to our hope that their sacrifices were not made in vain, I ask you to consider removing one shoe – if it’s not too difficult a thing for you to do – and to bring it forward and offer it, temporarily, as a sign of our belief that with God the deal has been sealed. We are standing on holy ground, surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Of this, yes, we are the witnesses. Amen.