

“Naomi’s Baby Boy”

*Ruth 3:15- 4:13-17; Hebrews 9:24-28;
Mark 12:38-44*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

November 8, 2015

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 24, Proper 27, November 8, 2015, dedicated to all the men and women of this congregation who have faithfully served their nation on the battlefields of war, to all our new members who joined today, to the beloved memory of Carol Anna Helm Hussey whose faithfulness and love of family inspired me and many and to my wife Susan Elizabeth Sitler in thanksgiving for our 30 years of life together following our marriage November 9, 1985 and always to the glory of God!

“Naomi’s Baby Boy”

Ruth 3:15- 4:13-17; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

++++
Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

++++

Standing in Union Cemetery in Cleveland, Ohio some years ago, I saw something I had not anticipated. Following the interment of their beloved father, I was walking among the gravestones with the family when one stone, catching the sunlight of an autumn day, caught my eye. What stood out was the name I had only, ever seen in the Bible. That name was “Obed.” In scripture, Obed was Ruth’s baby boy, Jesse’s father and the grandfather of King David. His name only appears three times – in Ruth, and then in the genealogies found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew.

But, here in the cemetery, this simple moss covered tombstone stood as link to the generations. As sometimes happens when you walk among the stones, I was looking at the missing link of generations which I had not known before. Obed was that generational connection.

Obed had died young, 24 years old. I later discovered he had died in World War I. As a young soldier, killed on the battlefields of France, he had left behind a widow and a young son. His wife remarried and his son took on the name of his new father – the family with whom I was standing. So the ties to his father were lost to most. With his death in war, **Obed’s name was buried with him** – buried beside his beloved wife and among family he never was given the opportunity to know because of his war-shortened death.

But, on this sun-soaked day, standing on a hillside of a cemetery in Ohio, light was shining on his name and his progeny. His son had become a leader in the community – a wonderful man. Great generations had come from the son of Obed, now lost in the present age.

I was to discover, in time, that Obed was a quiet man – and quite a man. Although young at his death, he spoke several languages. He was a handsome, gifted artist and musician. Had he survived the war, who knows what he might have done, what music he may have composed, what poetry he may have written, what great work of art he may have mastered and presented to a waiting world.

In the Book of Ruth, the first Obed was no man of distinction. The only thing we really know about this man **whose name means “servant” or “workman”** is that he was the link of greatness to King David. Had he not been born, you and I would not have the connection of King David to Jesus of Nazareth. In a true sense, if it were not for Obed, we would not be here today. **Ruth’s baby boy is a major** reason we are gathered as witnesses of Christ and those who receive a blessing today in his name.

In this tale of tragedy turned to hope, a Moabite woman named Naomi marries **“a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah”** named Elimelech. Together they have two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. The story tells us that all three men

die too young, leaving Naomi alone in this world except for her widowed daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Orpah stays in Moab, but Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law and ventures back with her to Bethlehem of Judah. There Ruth meets Boaz. In time they are married and from their marriage, Obed is conceived and born.

Why, you might ask, is today's sermon then entitled, "Naomi's Baby Boy" if Obed is Ruth's son? Good question. We read in our text today that: "*Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'a son had been born to Naomi'*" (Ruth 4:17). Naomi is Obed's grandmother but raises him as one who has lost both sons to tragic and untimely death. She raises him as her own which signals the deep and close relationship she has with Ruth and the boy.

The birth of Obed following such heartbreaking loss and the unusual ties which bind together the Moabite women and their Judean relatives shows, in many ways, the strange and mysterious work of God. How often have you said, "*God works in mysterious ways?*" Although this particular phrase is not found anywhere in the Bible and is often misquoted as though it is, we say it as an expression of **the things in our lives and in this world that don't make sense to us, but must make sense to God.** Most likely coming from English poet William Cowper's 18th Century

Hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” begins “*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea And rides upon the storm,*” the mysterious movement of God in this world is as beautiful as it is inexplicable.

On this Veterans Day weekend, in which the stories of the men and women who have sacrificed their lives in war are lifted-up and remembered, I am mindful that God’s mysterious hand is everywhere working in this world. I am witness to this. If it were not for a few inches of trajectory from German bomb shrapnel lodging in my father’s back during the Battle of the Bulge in WW II, I would not exist. That shrapnel just missed my father’s spine and its final entry point into dad meant that the wounds of war allowed him to live, return home, marry my mom and produce three children.

When I was with my parents for a week this past summer, my 91-year-old father was answering questions from his 24 year-old grandson, Daniel. I was listening in as Dad talked of the war. Dad was a runner -- taking messages between units on foot – while trying to avoid the enemy’s capture or sniper fire. Although I heard stories through the years, as I was listening to dad tell Daniel the stories, I off-handedly asked, “Dad, how many runners were there in your unit?” “We had six runners.” Then I asked, “How

many of the six survived the war?” Dad quietly responded, “I was the only one to make it home.” Five of six runners were killed in action. Five men came home in boxes. One man came home to live a full and meaningful life. Why? How?

In the film, “Saving Private Ryan,” as the film ends following the death of many, including Captain John H. Miller, an old Private James Ryan stands at Captain Miller’s grave in the US Cemetery in Normandy, France. He speaks to Captain Miller’s grave. He recalls their last moments in life together when Captain Miller said, “Earn this.”

Addressing Captain Miller’s grave, Private Ryan speaks: *“My family is with me today. They wanted to come with me. To be honest with you, I wasn't sure how I'd feel coming back here. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I tried to live my life the best that I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that, at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me.”*

James’ wife comes beside him and reads the headstone, “Captain John H. Miller.” Her husband says, “Tell me I have led a good life.” “What?” she replies. He continues, “Tell me I'm a good man.” Holding onto him she says, “You are.” With that, Private Ryan stands back and salutes his Captain.

Today, let each of us recall with great love, all who have gone before us – laying down their lives for us. May we, like Private Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. and Private James Ryan, live our lives in honor of them. May we dedicate ourselves to live good lives – for those who died too young. In strange and mysterious ways, we are all connected across time and space with those who have served our country in battle – those who lived and those who died. May we always remember them, running the race that is set before us – as a way of completing the race that was set before them. Like Naomi, may we hold onto our children and grandchildren and those whom God has given into our care with every ounce of grace and mercy and love within us. For in a strange and mysterious and God-given sense, they are all **Naomi's babies**. In a spiritual and mysterious sense, we all are **Naomi's babies**. Amen.

Copyright 2015, First Congregational Church, UCC