

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett  
November 8, 2009  
Ruth 3:1 - 4:17, Mark 12:38-44  
Risk and Restoration, From Little or Nothing: Plenty!

I have here a copy of the Whittier Daily News. The front page article is all about dying churches. Empty pews, there are just no people there. Ironically, directly below that story is a story about what the cut in state funding for shelters for victims of domestic violence has done to the <sup>1</sup>services they provide. There are plenty of people there.

But, back to the dying churches. One pastor said, “to continually reinvent who you are for the sake of the lost is a challenge.” It seems that in order to develop our identity we should consider the entertainment and spectator aspects of society, and model and mold our ministry to fit the community and the “changing market”. Our measurement of success? How full the pews are, how many people visit and join.

One church in the article is driven by the desire to share something important, and another says that drawing people to us requires that we love one another and show our oneness. One pastor says that if we are really following the gospel, it doesn't matter how many people we have in the pews. I think he means that he is

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<sup>1</sup> “Room with a Pew: Churches face identity crisis as numbers drop,” Brandon Ferguson, Whittier Daily News November 1, 2009, page A 1.

not afraid of driving people away by preaching things that, he at least, is sure are true.

But there was something deeply disturbing about this article for me. From the perspective of the congregations, it is all about us. How our pews aren't full, what we are doing to increase our numbers, how we are or are not adjusting to the consumer, how we can compete in the marketplace for souls won and memberships realized. But I tell you, it is not about us.

It is about loving others. As far as filling our pews or counting new members, having contemporary or traditional worship, preaching what is uplifting, boring or true, all that doesn't matter- if they never come in the doors. The people out there only see what we do!

There is an identity crisis but it is not about us. It is about God. The people in churches say their identity is the people of God and they follow Jesus. Well, Jesus only called a few people to join him. But he and his disciples served and ministered to many more people without any agenda except to love them and show them the love of God. In the end, some of those people did join, but that is not what it was about!

The woman in our scripture reading, Ruth, had little or nothing. She left home to marry and be taken care of. When her husband, father-in-law and brothers-in-law all died, she had no skills and no family, no options. All she had

was her mother-in-law. She took a risk and committed to care for her, even traveling to a place where she was a stranger with no future. But then she married a man who loved and took care of her. And God gave her a child and then an entire family. A woman who once had little- no future at all, took a risk and became the mother of plenty- generations and a dynasty; the great grandmother of King David, and the ancestress of the King of Kings, Jesus the Christ.

Ruth could have and perhaps should have been depressed, but a quick cure for worry, is to get outside your self. To serve others, to raise the spirits of others, to see how other's needs are almost always greater, to give when you think you have nothing. Because the little you have to give, may be a fortune to others. And combined with others it can become a treasure.

Earlier I told a short story about Heifer international and a beekeeper. I said that it was necessary for the man to take a risk, to rely on something very little (a bee), and then, in gratitude, use what he had to serve others, creating plenty! Here is a story about the UCC Child Sponsorship program<sup>2</sup> from little to plenty.

A man named Peter sponsored a girl named Saranya. After thirteen years he got to go to the Family Village Farm in India to meet her. He took a train that passed stations in areas that were very poor. Not only were there men sleeping on pieces of cardboard, but whole families curled up together. He learned that pay for a whole day of labor in this area is \$1.

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<sup>2</sup> [www.ucc.or/child-sponsorship/eyes-to-see.html](http://www.ucc.or/child-sponsorship/eyes-to-see.html)

A crowd of children came and escorted him to meet Saranya like attendants to their leader. His feeling upon laying his eyes on her was one of a deep bond and connection. Here was his long lost daughter! They shared two days together. He showed her pictures of his family- her adopted family and she knew every name. She gave him a tour of the farm. He saw the cottage where she lives with other children with a “mother,” often a widow who has been ostracized by society.

In her cottage there was a plaque that read, “in as much as you have done to the least of these...” Peter sang songs and told Bible stories with the children. He visited their school, and the bakery where other widows and elderly women who would otherwise be homeless work. He found the Farm peaceful and hospitable.

As Peter left he felt a deep sense of gratitude for the spirit of love, this was truly the Beloved Community. He vowed to redouble his sponsorship. The cost to sponsor a child through the UCC program is \$25 to \$30 a month. A relatively small amount each month for us here- it is a whole month pay there. It has brought plenty to Saranya. It transformed Peter.

And then there is the UCC church in Connecticut that understands the meaning of Veteran’s Day. A while back Jeff Burgee heard a fellow member tell about her experiences as a psychiatric nurse at the VA hospital. Jeff was moved by the needs of the disabled veterans but felt he had little to give. But he chanced on Operation Take a Vet Fishing Day, and the congregation jumped at the

opportunity. Little did they know that their first group would be 12 blind Korean War and World War II veterans. Jeff admits he was initially wary, “blind vets with hooks and knives and sharp fish teeth?”<sup>3</sup> But it worked!

Taking a disabled veteran fishing may seem such a little thing to give. But the first year there were three groups, the second 6 and this year 11. “[The veterans] have been marginalized by society... but [the] congregation has embraced them.” Although fishing is the purported reason for the event, it is the backdrop for a spending quality time with the veterans. And recently the church brought in an instructor so they could all learn how to work with the blind.

Putting a price on benefit gleaned from the experience would be impossible. “One time, a vet was fishing and had two volunteers helping him. He caught his first fish ever, and I don’t know who was more excited! They were all jumping up and down and shouting and laughing.” And the “living history lessons,” really open up to the kids. Finally, a surprising benefit has been the veterans wanted to come to church on Sunday mornings. This year alone, 90 have come. Jeff says, “It’s been so enriching for our congregation to have this influx.”

Jesus contrasted the woman with her few pennies against the scribes and rich people. Those with much lorded it over others, and were rewarded by the attention they received. The woman risked giving the little she had, and it was plenty. She

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<sup>3</sup> [www.ucc.org/news/casting-kindness-connecticut.html](http://www.ucc.org/news/casting-kindness-connecticut.html)

was not bowed down by appearances or worry about her own needs. Her reward was knowing that she was the child of a loving God.

Enriching, transformed, plenty. These words were not used in the dying churches article. And in these stories there is nothing of reinventing who you are, entertainment and spectator considerations, or modeling and molding ministry to fit the changing market. These stories are not about filling the pews or how many people visit and join. They are about affirming our identity as the people of God, and ministering to people without any agenda except to love them and show them the love of God. It is about risk that brings restoration; from little or nothing to plenty.

Now do you think that it was an accident that the dying church article- empty pews with no people, just happened to appear right above a story about a whole group of people needing to be served? I don't think so. I think it was the editor's editorial right there on the front page.

There are plenty of people for us to go love. Let us claim our identity. Amen.