

Ruth 1:1-18
Hebrews 9:11-14

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MARKED FOR LIFE

In Old Testament times the people would gather at certain festivals before the high priest in the Jerusalem temple (or in the portable, tent-like tabernacle in their wilderness wanderings) to seek God's forgiveness for wrongs done and for the good things left undone. As the designated animal was slaughtered and offered to God for the atonement, the substitutionary atonement of their sins, its blood would be caught in a basin. Then the High Priest would plunge his hand into the great brass bowl, and with a dramatic sweep of his arm hurl the spattering blood upon the congregation, while other priests hurled ashes from an incinerated heifer (from which comes the term *holocaust*) in a great ash cloud on the people. Their stained garments were a public and a private testimony that they were fully God's people again. They were marked for life. Marked with a newness of life. That incident is what the writer of Hebrews is referring to.

But he goes on to say, that if this could be accomplished with the blood of goats and bulls, how much more through the blood of Christ, who offered his sinless self. However, when we are baptized, marked for life as God's people, no visible mark remains from the sprinkled water. So one of the most characteristic markings of the Christian is anonymity. Nothing about the appearance of most Christians, would easily give us away. For the most part, we wear no characteristic dress, no fez, or turban, or black frock coat of a Hasidic Jew. Our women do not mark themselves with a crimson dot on the forehead, as many Hindu women do, or cover their faces in public, as do some Muslim women. To be sure some Christian sects like the Amish and Mennonites wear distinctive clothes, but for the most part we are strikingly inconspicuous. One might have great difficulty picking out a Christian in a police line-up. Whatever marks our faith has to be exhibited in other ways. After all, we *have* been marked, and for life. We have been sealed with the loving approval of our God.

When we are baptized, sprinkled with the mark of the covenant, it leaves a mark invisible to the world until the one baptized happens to demonstrate the character and actions of Christ. We are known, as Paul puts it, by our fruits. This is the essence of Ruth's story, a story—not incidentally—without either plot or villain. What, then, attracts us to her story? It is her conduct and character that draw us to her story. Similarly, when we participate in the meal of the covenant, the Lord's Supper, there is no visible evidence to the world when we step outside this sanctuary that we are God's people, marked the blood

of Christ; until we do something with the marks of Christ in it.

Whenever we, too, come clean before God, seeking that amendment of life that all honest souls must admit finds us less than perfect, it is as the day of atonement for us when we are touched with the sign of God's approval of us, the sign that we are loved and valued. In baptism we are marked for life as God's own. And at this table we reach for that nourishment which promises to strengthen and sustain that desire.

This little elevated place we call the chancel is given to a lot of promise making: baptisms, confirmation, weddings, commissioning of teachers, ordinations and installations. We build our lives to each other and to God upon such promise making. And here, says God,

- 'Upon these promises, will I build my kingdom. Here upon these words, these fleeting waves of sound free floating for an instant in the still air, then lost to everything except memory—upon these frail things,' says God, 'will I plant my trust, and give my blessing.'
- 'Here,' says God, 'will I build a family. Here in this little microcosm of the kingdom will I teach them how to love, in spite of momentary anger and despair.'
- 'Here will I let them learn about security, even as they feel most vulnerable and afraid.'
- 'Here will I teach them how to trust one another, even when trusting seems absurd, like faith in one unseen.'
- 'Here will they eat, listen, share laughter, be clothed, and find shelter.'
- 'Here in the family will I teach them how to rise from adversity. And when as children they have tasted and touched these things within the home, I will enlarge the circle of their trusting into the school, the work place, community and family'
- 'And even when these things are imperfectly felt I will place such a seed of yearning in the heart for my kingdom, that when they stumble and fall they will be drawn to try again, to make new promises with a new resolve.'
- 'I will build my kingdom on so slender a thing as a promise,' says the Lord. 'And I will seal it with a covenant meal, a marriage feast about this table.'
- 'But first, if your promises are to reap the blessings that they seek, anchor them in me. Choose me this day. Pledge yourself to me, then I can bless you. And seal your promise with this meal about my table.'

Amen.