

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



**To Live is Holy**  
**Ruth 1.6-16; 4.14-17 and I Corinthians 2.4-7**  
**September 18, 2005**  
**Amy Jacks Dean**

## Intro to Scripture

The New Interpreter's Commentary suggests that the Ruth text is a good text for All Saints Day. You know the story, don't you? Naomi and her husband and their two sons leave their famined land and head to Moab. There the two sons marry Moabite women, but then Naomi's husband dies, and both of her sons, and she decides to go back home. Filled with bitterness and with nothing to her name and with no hope for a future without men in her life, Naomi heads home. And she encourages her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab with their own families. She believed that was their only hope for life. Orpah, filled with sadness, listens to her elder and stays in Moab, but Ruth had a mind of her own. With her mother-in-law as the only one holding any authority over her, Ruth didn't listen. The obvious reason that Ruth should be in that All Saints Hall of Fame is that she was "the change-agent whose loving faithfulness reflects God's faithfulness to Naomi." But the commentator quickly reminds the reader that All Saints is not about the faithfulness of the saints - it's about the faithfulness of God. "Because Naomi does not act as we expect the faithful to act, it is easier for us to see that her story is about the faithfulness of God, and not about the faithfulness of humankind. Thus there is a message of good news for those who can see themselves mirrored in the character of Naomi: God can use us, as weak and as faulty as we may be, just as God used Naomi, even in the

midst of her bitterness and grief, to accomplish some small part in the work of God in the world. Like Naomi, we can be called 'saints,' not because we have been extraordinarily faithful to God but because God has been extraordinarily faithful to us." (The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume II, page 912) Read text.

\*\*\*\*\*

As a child and as a teenager, my mother said that my name should be Amy "Can-I-Go" Jacks. I was always asking to go here or there, always annoying, aggravating, and begging my parents to be on the go somewhere - anywhere, to do something - anything. I could "wear them down" with the best of them - and I got my way more times than not. My Dad was harder to work than my mother, but I learned the tricks to get to him as well. He didn't like telling me no, so he'd "hem and haw" and my assumption was always that the answer was "Yes" until I heard an official "No." And even then if I received a "No," I was willing to continue to gently push to see if there be any flexibility in this negative response. This frustrated my father to no end, and if I pushed him too far, that's when I'd hear about my father's father - Daddy B - and how he had worked. Daddy B's philosophy was strict, direct, to the point. So if I pushed my father too far, I would hear the phrase - uttered in exasperation in that final tone indicating that I had indeed pushed too hard - "When Daddy B spoke, the Board had met!" If I ever heard that, it meant that I had ventured into the land of disrespecting my father. He would have never pushed Daddy B to the limit. If I heard it once I heard it a million times - my father would say, "If I asked Daddy B if I could go out on a date and Daddy B said 'no,' the Board had met - end of discussion." Obviously there was no wearing Daddy B down. It was a matter of respect of elders. No talking back. No arguing.

Back then, children weren't first in line - the elders were. Children were more seen than heard and the elderly were given their due attention. At least that's the way it goes in the memories of the older generation. But I suspect that every generation of senior adults feels that they respected their elders more than they receive respect. I suspect that every generation of children had a way of wearing down their parents (even Daddy B!). I suspect that every generation pines for the good old days. And I suspect that will never change.

On this day when we give special attention to our senior adult population (many of whom are senior adults even though they don't want to acknowledge that out loud!) - a day when we honor them, thank them, and look to them for wisdom, what is the Good News to hear for today? I believe that the Good News is that to live is holy. Period. Every breath we take holds the rich opportunity of the divine clashing with the human making each and every moment full of sacred possibility. That's true for each of us at any stage of life, but it is our elders that we look to today – the ones who have taken a few more breaths than others of us, the ones whose lives have seen more, heard more, lived more.

It used to be, and I do believe this is true though I will quote no statistics to you nor do I have any sociological study to report, I'll simply go with my gut and the observations of my short life – that senior adults held more authority than they do today. The matriarch and the patriarch were held in high esteem simply by their place in life. An aura of wisdom accompanied the elderly purely because they were “chronologically advanced.” (That's the politically correct term perhaps.) And while I still have that sense of awe, personally, I worry that we are not teaching our children that same respect. In a society, where at the age of 50 you'd better stick it out in the job you have because

corporations aren't interested in you - yet more and more people are living well into their 80s and 90s – we'd better reclaim the respect for the aged. They are hiring folks younger - someone more on the cutting edge – energetic, with new ideas. Our fast paced world doesn't seem to have the time for the folks that walk a little slower. Our fast paced society doesn't take the time listen to the stories of experience and to learn from the lessons lived. One social worker put it this way: “Aging reveals those things that youth conceals. We see farther and with clearer vision.” ((Review and Expositor, *The Graying of the Church*, “Spiritual and Faith Development in the Later Years,” Jon Rainbow, Vol. 88, No. 3, Summer 1991, page 196)

“The church for the most part today is elderly. We may think of the future of the church as being in the hands of the young, but it is actually [currently] in the hands of the old. A great deal of ambiguity permeates our thinking about the aging. Is it a decline or an ascent? Should we describe life as journey that moves upward until it peaks about middle age and then slopes downward to death? Shall we work to prevent aging or learn to revere it? . . . The fact is that aging is both descent and ascent, both loss and gain. This is true of growth at every stage of the life cycle: childhood, adolescence, midlife, and old age. Time is both life and death. Change encompasses both emerging and perishing. At every point in the human journey we find that we have to let go in order to move forward; and letting go means dying a little. In the process we are created anew, awakened afresh to the source of our being. Aging is a paradox, the unity of apparent contradictions.”

(Review and Expositor, *The Graying of the Church*, “Spiritual and Faith Development in the Later Years,” Jon Rainbow, Vol. 88, No. 3, Summer 1991, page 195)

Ruth's story on the service is all about Ruth and her "entreating not to leave thee." But as I ponder this story some more, I recognize that Naomi is the real key player in this story. Even in her bitterness, her loneliness, her hopelessness – she sought what was best for her two younger companions. And at the thought of parting from one another – the text says - they wept aloud. Life's struggles had been her lesson. Life's pain and disappointment had been her degree. Naomi was the wiser elder – and while she spoke mainly out of her bitterness, she spoke words of truth and reality. But Ruth did not listen. Or maybe we should say she just didn't follow Naomi's advice. Maybe it was precisely because Ruth was listening that she followed Naomi back to her homeland and made it home for herself. Out of love, out of compassion, out of a selfish desire for community, who knows the real reason, but Ruth followed Naomi home and took care of her. Ruth allowed Naomi to reclaim her name, her fullness, her joy. And while I'm sure Naomi never forgot the pain of life's struggles that the years had dealt her, she had hope in her old age as she cradled that new child in her arms.

"Spirituality is the capacity to affirm life in the face of death. [The story is told of a man in his seventies dying of cancer.] In and out of his room moved several of his nine children, wanting to be with him at the end or to provide some comfort during his last hours. His breathing was slow and labored. His consciousness came and went like life flickering shafts of sunlight against a darkening sky. The first grandson to carry his name to the next generation had been born a few days earlier and brought to his bedside. And on the last day of his life, in the midst of restless hours of sleep and waking, he struggled to sit up, painfully held out his arms, and very slowly said, with a warm smile on his face, 'Let's go see that baby again.'" (Review and Expositor, *The Graying of the Church*,

“Spiritual and Faith Development in the Later Years,” Jon Rainbow, Vol. 88, No. 3, Summer 1991, page 197)

Thank you, Naomi, in your old age, for reminding all of us that we need to cradle babies as a sign of hope. And thank you, senior adults, in your old age, in this place for telling your stories and imparting your wisdom and reminding us of what it looks like to live lives worthy of the calling of God – through pain and joy, through suffering and celebration. In last week’s children’s time, Ray Honeycutt said it all. He sat right there beside me, walking cane in hand, and reminded all of us of the beautiful sight that sat before him – the children. I hope the children recognize what a beautiful sight he is – he’s one of many beautiful sights.

“D.H. Lawrence poem entitled “Shadows”:

And if, in the changing phases of human life  
I fall in sickness and in misery  
my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead  
and strength is gone, and my life  
is only the leavings of a life:

and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion,  
and snatches of renewal  
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new,  
strange flowers  
such as my life has not brought forth before, new  
blossoms of me -

To be a human being is to exist between birth and death, to be capable of both wrenching anguish and deep joy.” ((Review and Expositor, *The Graying of the Church*, “Spiritual and Faith Development in the Later Years,” Jon Rainbow, Vol. 88, No. 3, Summer 1991, page 202) And so today we gather - each of us existing in the place between birth and death – each of us caught somewhere dangling between that wrenching anguish and that deep joy – and we take a deep breath to steady ourselves for the sacred

possibility of this moment. May we remember in every stage of life that “just to live is holy.” (Joshua Heschel) May it be so.