

**September 26/27, 2009**

**Ruth 1:6-18**

**What If ... All of Us Are Invited?**

**Rev. Susan Bresser**

I had a dream earlier this week. I was at the mall – East Towne – and wanted to go to Boston Store. I was leaving JC Penney to walk thru the mall, but I had to take a detour. I was directed to go down some steps and walk through an underground tunnel. I got to the end of the tunnel to another set of stairs. There was a sign that read “Boston Store” with an arrow pointing up. I climbed the steps and ended up outside. Right in front of me was Boston Store. But I wasn’t in Madison any longer. I was in Baltimore. And for some reason it didn’t surprise me because in my dream I thought, “Oh, I guess you have to come to Baltimore to shop at Boston Store.” I walked into the store and there was a large counter that went from wall to wall. You couldn’t walk into the store proper because the counter was in the way. I saw no way in ... but past the counter I could see people shopping. There were two clerks behind the counter. One of them looked at me and said, “What do you want?” “I want to go in the store.” She just shook her head and kept doing what she was doing – whatever she was doing – behind the counter. The other clerk looked at me and said, “What do you want?” “I want to go shopping.” She, too, shook her head and kept busy behind the counter. Now at that point in my dream, I was surprised and very uncomfortable with my surroundings. All of a sudden a little girl grabbed my hand. She asked me if I wanted to go in the store. I nodded. She said, “Follow me, I know the way in.” And there was a secret door that led into the Boston Store so that I could shop. And then I woke up.

What in the world was that all about? This dream had nothing to do with the Boston Store. I don't shop at Boston Store very often but when I do, I receive very wonderful service. I have been to Baltimore – several times – but I've never made a trip specifically for shopping. **That dream was all about the church.** It was. It was ... because I know what I was reading before I went to bed that night ... a book called *Being Church for All Generations: Reaching People Under 40 while Keeping People Over 60*.

Here's how I interpret my dream. Oftentimes we have a really big counter – a really big obstacle – that stretches across all doorways into the church and in order to find your way in, you need to know where the secret passageway is located. And if you can't find the way in, you better hope that a child will lead you.

Does it surprise you that we, as committed church people, keep others out? Oh, I don't think we do it intentionally – not always, at least. The Church – the established Church – is facing a challenge: we now live in a secular, unchurched culture. The power and the influence of the institutional church is fading rapidly.

Since 1991, the adult population in the United States has grown by 15%. During that same period the number of adults who do not attend church has nearly doubled, rising from 39 million to 75 million – a 92% increase.\*

At the present rate of change [in our culture], most Americans will be non-Christians by the year 2035. \*\*

Interests in new religious movements (New Age, etc.) is growing rapidly. In particular, Wiccans are doubling in numbers about every 30 months. \*\*\*

At the present rate of change, Islam will become the dominant religion in the world before 2050. \*\*\*\*

(All of these statistics are from the Barna Group, ReligiousTolerance.org, and adherents.com)

Let's look at our denomination. The United Methodist Church is the largest mainline Protestant Church in the United States. And for the first time since the 1930s, the membership of the United Methodist Church in the United States has dropped to just under 8 million. Membership continues to decline annually.

Is this your problem? Or is it mine? I would actually prefer that we share it.

What if ...? What if all of us are invited? Those of us sitting in this place have felt some sense of invitation, probably, or at least we feel somewhat comfortable being here. But think of it this way: We know how to get in.

What if all of us are invited to a life of faith? The language we use is clear: we want to proclaim that all are invited to a life of faith. We stress – I know we do – that all are invited to a life with God. But do we work hard enough at making sure all who are invited can get in? Because for many, that's what leads to a life of faith ... if I can get **in** the church then I might begin to

better understand this thing called faith and this thing called life and how the two of them fit together.

The Book of Ruth is from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. It's good to look at our foundation every once in awhile, but we are also challenged to determining how to interpret what God is trying to tell us.

My interpretation, in reference to our topic today: Don't be a Naomi. In the first chapter of Ruth, Naomi is not very inviting. She couldn't be at that time in her life, for she had nothing and she really wasn't interested – I don't think – in taking care of her two foreign daughters-in-law. Her call was not to lead them to a life of faith. She was far more interested in taking care of herself. Orpah got the message and left. Ruth stayed, accepting the change that needed to take place to be of support to Naomi.

Are you a Naomi, inwardly focused on how you will be served?

Or are you a Ruth, focusing outward on how others might be served?

Are you a Naomi, not excited about change and not eager to take a risk, insulated and isolated from culture? Or you a Ruth, willing to change, to adapt, to learn how the current culture affects you and your faith?

“In a day when the number of unchurched Americans has increased 92% between 1991 and 2004, we are confronted with the church values and systems that are designed to be more inwardly focused than outwardly focused.” *Under 40 – Over 60*

Something works for you here, at the Sun Prairie United Methodist Church. I don't know what that is, but something works. Rev. Dick Jones, a Wisconsin UM guru says, if your church has crowded corridors and crowded fellowship hour and people are talking to one another and children are running through the halls and adults make wise decisions regarding church leadership and mission awareness and people are excited about ministry, chances are good that your church is on its way to focusing OUTWARD.

Sounds like us, kinda, sorta, a little bit. ... Great, pat yourselves on the back for only for about 2 seconds. We got a long way to go!

Something touches you here that helps you say: a life of faith is important to me. Something brings you here that you helps you define that a life with God is important. Something brings you here that helps you say: I'm going to work really hard on being a follower of Jesus. I don't know what that something is. If we surveyed everyone, we would have different answers. But whatever it is, could you please tell your neighbor? Not your neighbor in the pew. Your neighbors outside of this place.

Can you please tell your neighbor that they are not alone? Can you please tell your friends that God loves them and cares for them and that Jesus died so they might have a chance at a new life? Can you please tell your friends?

The most common characteristic of a church that is able to focus OUTWARD is the ability of parishioners – the church family – to articulate their faith stories to each other and to the outside world. TELL YOUR STORY. Many times that's a way of invitation to a life of faith.

And can you please help me and help one another remove the barriers that block the doors leading into the church? That way we don't have to search for a secret entrance. Let us pray that it is public knowledge that Jesus died for the world, not just for our church.

What if all of us are invited? It'd be some big party, now wouldn't it?

And may it be so. Amen.