

The Feast of All Saints (transferred)
November 4, 2019 at St. Anne's Church, Annapolis
The Rev. Dr. Timothy Mulder
Text: Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34

From time to time, God drops a handkerchief; at least that's what Barbara Brown Taylor says. Barbara is someone who notices things. In days gone by, a woman might intentionally, but not too blatantly, drop her handkerchief so that some gentleman in the vicinity would notice, pick it up and return it from whence it came.

So to say God drops a handkerchief every now and then is to say that God does something subtle to get our attention. It's not a smack you over the head sort of thing.

In the case of an ancient woman from the land of Judah named Naomi, the handkerchief was a daughter-in-law named Ruth from the land of Moab, who married Naomi's son, Chilion.

As our story begins there was a famine in the land of Judah and people had to flee or starve. When Naomi and her husband got to this new land where no one was like them their boys met and married two local girls. But then Elimelech died and so did the two boys, leaving three widows in a culture where a woman had to be either cared for by her family, or become a beggar or prostitute.

It would have been easier for Ruth and her sister just to go back to their own families, but Ruth decided that she would not abandon Naomi. Naomi was old, frail and there were no guarantees life would be better for her back in Judah. But Ruth's mind was made up. She would do anything, go anywhere to make sure Naomi was not alone. She would be there to care for her with everything she was and had. Ruth becomes God's handkerchief.

By that I mean, that when all that could possibly go wrong in your life has gone wrong, when all hope seems dried up and you don't know where to turn and you're close to desperate and will try almost anything, I think it was in that kind of moment that a young woman of a different land and religion, showed through her actions that God will not abandon us and that God is known through acts of love, even from a daughter-in-law who has little to gain by being nice to you.

Today we are celebrating both All Saints' Day and baptisms and our Gospel is about loving God and one another with everything you've got.

I think the way we most often learn how to love is by being loved first. Somebody loves us and we learn how to love others. It may be a friend saying, "Let me drive you home." It may be someone working extra hours to put you through college. It may be a daughter-in-law being thoughtful or sacrificing or just showing up.

This Thursday night I was in New York to bury the ashes of my mother and father. A woman came up to me and said, "You've never met me, but ten years ago I had stayed up drinking all night, and I don't know why, but I stumbled my way into this church the next morning. The usher brought me to your mother who took my hand and led me to a little room behind the church. She poured me a cup of coffee, listened to my story, cried with me and then called me every week for the rest of that year. I haven't had a drop to drink since then. I just want you to know, God saved my life through your mother's kindness.

I am convinced that a lot of what eternal life means has more to do with noticing the handkerchiefs God drops along our way than it does with what happens when we die. We get to know God by the people in our lives who share acts of love, simple, everyday acts of respect for strangers, kindness to someone in need, generosity when it can't be paid back – you know, handkerchiefs...

Today, we baptize people into that way of eternity, that way of a cycle of love that continues as long as people act as God acts. And personally, I find it kind of fun to go through life looking for the handkerchiefs, no matter who drops them.