



"It Takes a Village"

a sermon by

Rev. Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
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This afternoon we will hear the second of two lessons from the book of Ruth that the lectionary allots for the year. Last week we talked about just how great a leap of faith it was for Ruth to commit herself to following her widowed mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem, a city that hated people from Ruth's homeland Moab. When it seemed that Ruth was forfeiting her future, God had other things in store and this week we will see exactly how. You will recall that Ruth and Naomi were both left widowed and childless, with no heirs to secure their future not only in the history books but in society for them. Ruth had been allowed to pick up stray grain for her livelihood in the fields of Boaz, their closest relative who has begun to admire Ruth for the rumors he's heard of all that she has done for her mother-in-law. Our reading comes to us from Ruth 3:1-13, 4:13-17.

“Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do. She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.” So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” He said, “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will not act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning...”

[And after Boaz met with the elders of the town to claim his kinship to Naomi, thus acquiring responsibility for her husband's land so that his inheritance may be passed on and also acquiring Ruth, scripture says] So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed, he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

Last week I mentioned briefly that Ruth is a book that offers some of the most beautiful expressions about love and devotion in the Bible without raising all of the eyebrows as does, say, the Song of Solomon. Well, this isn't exactly true. Ruth does raise some eyebrows, but more significantly it raises up a witness to a God who works through the most unlikely people, behind

the scenes of the most unexpected scenarios to make all things work together for good.

I'll go ahead and put it out there now- no one knows what happened on the threshing room floor. One of the things that is lost in most translations of this story is the fact that the author weaves a remarkable tapestry of words in the Hebrew. There are lines that rhyme and play word games off of one another throughout, playing tricks on the mind and the ear of the ancient reader while telling a great story at the same time. Trace the root word of many of the pronouns or verbs used and you will find a slew of deepened or double meanings that stretch far back into the pages of the Biblical literature. The same is true for phrases as well. So, for example, when Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her, she could surely be asking that he share his blanket, but according to the language she could also be propositioning him, making a marriage proposal, or asking for him to provide the shelter of the Lord. It doesn't take a Biblical scholar to intuit that the phrase, 'uncovered his feet' probably has multiple associations in the scriptures, and it surely does. The role of sexuality in this story is not to be dismissed but it also cannot really be clarified either. And so the scholars warn us to approach these ambiguities with a mind set on neither sensation nor naiveté but on the lesson or lessons that the story is trying to tell.

In these final two chapters of the four in the book of Ruth, there are a number of powerful forces that come together through God's people to carry out his will, though they may not have known it at the time. Certainly only in hindsight when we begin at the bottom line of the family tree with Jesus and trace it up to David and then Jesse then to the child of Boaz and Ruth do we see with clarity how each person had to come together as they did to accomplish God's purposes. But come together they did indeed. First with a step of faith from Ruth- refusing to return to her homeland but instead remaining by the side of her mother-in-law despite the prospect of being a loathed outsider forever. Then Naomi returning home to Bethlehem broken and bitter over the death of her husband and sons. The city grieves with her and welcomes them in despite the old prejudices. She then becomes persistent in finding a way to secure a future for her daughter-in-law who dealt with her lovingly. They needed a next of kin for their integrity, their honor, and their lives. And so then Ruth and Naomi took their place alongside a tradition of women in the Bible whose agency and activity changed the course of history for the people Israel and sustained crucial ancestry at critical times. They approach Boaz with a proposal in the name of the deceased that will change his life that was quite comfortable as it was, thank you very much, forever. Boaz responds with compassion and integrity. He claims his responsibility, and then acts. The community rejoices, the widows are restored not only in their circumstances but the scripture says in their hearts as well, and a child is born.

What I think the story of Ruth may be trying to share with us is a snapshot of the kingdom of God at its very best. Where the qualities of courage, confrontation, integrity, and sense enough to claim the right thing to do in a situation become the vehicles through which God will act in order to bless his people and accomplish a work of redemption that the players here and now could not even begin to imagine, but whose fruits they have only begun to enjoy. Essentially, among other things, "the book of Ruth is an example of what life in God's inbreaking kingdom looks like. Populated by people taking risks out of faith in God's future action, seeking to live righteously and according to traditions, and being open to the ways God breaks down barriers" in order to do a new thing. In order to open possibilities in life and in the future of the community

where none seem to exist.

This is going to sound awful, but I tend to get a little depressed after election day because I find myself feeling fearful over what the year ahead will hold rather than being excited about what I can hope for. Its terrible, I know, but I think I've gradually been conditioned over the years not because of the caliber or capabilities of the people called into office but because of the nature of politics with its competing persuasions and pressures that I am amazed that anyone can bear. And so I can't help but think that the message of Ruth is particularly appropriate for the season and for us here today. For I wonder what would look like if we were to hold our leaders and one another accountable to this vision of the kingdom presented in Ruth? What would it look like if we pursued *together* that vision? Where one is emboldened to step out in seemingly reckless faith into the unknown. Who is then embraced by a community who sets aside all prior assumptions and chooses to walk beside that person in their sorrow and joy because of their common humanity and their heart rather than their place of birth or status in society. What if people were not afraid to ask for what they need from each other to make their circumstances or spirits right, and could pursue intimately the one who has the power to make change. Who would then respond with integrity, righteousness, compassion and love and *action*. And the two are then bound together in ways that would change their lives, and cause not only heads to be held high and the community to sing praises, but the world to be transformed?¹

I get why the complexity of our world makes it feel like this may be far too much to hope for- God's kingdom here on earth on its best day. But apparently it isn't. Because this history is part of Jesus' story and he invites us to make it our own. Virtually the entire Biblical witness is about the gifts and initiative of the people unfolding to the glory of God who is tenderly, powerfully guiding them and preparing the way and who says that each of us has a place in that story too wherever you find yourself within it. You've probably heard it said that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it takes an entire community of faith to be an instrument for God's singular will. We have a role to play in the Lord's work for others and for his kingdom here on earth. The book of Ruth is inviting us to do our part. Amen.

¹ Lawrence Farris, Lawrence, The Lectionary Commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, p.163-165.