

Ruth and Naomi Take Matters Into Their Own Hands

Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

I'll be the first to admit that this was a strange choice of scripture readings to preach on this morning. In most other years the lectionary would have had us reading the first part of the story of Ruth, but because last Sunday was All Saints Day the lectionary turned its back on Ruth and Mark in favor of more suitable readings for the day. So that leaves us with this odd reading today, the lone piece of the story of Ruth we will get this year. It's bad enough to have to try to make sense out of two snippets of verses out of a short story, but then to truncate it even more and give us this particular part is even more challenging.

And it was a challenge I couldn't resist.

Today's installment in this little soap opera (and Ruth is nothing if not a soap opera) deserves a little extra explanation because of some cultural and literary quirks. And it's stuff like this that makes me think that the churches that send all their elementary school kids off to another part of the church during worship might be on to something. So here we go. In the first scene, Naomi instructs her daughter-in-law to go seduce Boaz, the wealthy landowner. That's what that whole 'uncovering his feet' business is about. Ruth does as she is told, and Boaz decides to marry her, and even though his intentions are honorable, the way he goes about it isn't entirely aboveboard. In other words, the story has a happy ending, but it gets there in some pretty crazy ways.

Years of movie-going have trained us to expect stories to end a certain way. The more tears there are in the beginning, the happier the ending will be. But stories with beloved pets and soul mates and beautiful, perfect children have us fishing for our hankies by the end. By Hollywood's standards, yes, this story should end with a happy couple snuggling on the porch swing watching the sun set. But this wasn't a Hollywood story, and it's important to realize that in the real world, a happy ending was never a certainty.

The first five verses of the story set the scene, and it's an absolutely devastating scene. A famine in Bethlehem drives a family from their home in search of food. Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons flee across the Jordan and Dead Sea to Moab, a land of foreigners and their foreign gods. A land of people who, not-so-long ago, were the enemies of the Israelites. But in an act of gracious hospitality the foreigners receive them, and they make their home there. And then tragedy strikes again – Elimelech dies, and then the two sons die, leaving behind the three women Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law. And women without male relatives to care for them were lost. They couldn't go back to school or get jobs at Wal-Mart or collect Social Security. They either died, or they depended on the good graces of a relative to take them in even though they were a liability, one more mouth to feed.

Here's the part of the story everyone knows: Naomi tries to send her daughters-in-law home to the men in the family who can put bread in their stomachs. One goes, albeit reluctantly, but the other one, Ruth, vows to stick with Naomi through thick and thin, mostly likely thin. She doesn't have any more wage earning capacity than Naomi does; she can't change the patriarchal and unjust mores of society that put widows at such risk, but there is something she can and will do: she's willing to die with her and be buried alongside her. Naomi might starve to death, but

at least she won't starve to death alone. Ruth may be foreign, but as they say around here, she's a good one.

Ruth is not the only good person in this story. Once they get back to Bethlehem, instead of waiting around for a handout, or for the winds of fate to come along and rescue them, Ruth gets permission from Naomi to go to the barley fields and glean, a practice that has come into favor again in recent years. Gleaning allows the poor, or just the hungry, to come along after a field has been harvested and take whatever the harvesters have left behind. And Ruth is apparently not only kind, but a hard worker, and those qualities get her noticed by a man named Boaz, who not only owns half the land around Bethlehem, but is also kin to Naomi. Things are starting to look up. Boaz gives her permission to glean in his fields whenever she wants, feeds her lunch, and sends her home with enough barley to keep her and Naomi from starving to death any time soon. Most important of all, perhaps, he sends her home with a blessing that God will take care of her as kindly and compassionately as she has cared for Naomi.

And here's where things get interesting, at least for 21st century North American Protestants with pretty clear ideas about how nice girls behave and what does and doesn't constitute a proper proposal of marriage. When the wheat and barley harvests are over and life gets risky again for the two widows, Naomi hatches a plan. Like all wise women who understand that the best time to ask a man for something is after he's well fed and perhaps had a glass of his favorite evening beverage, Naomi tells Ruth to doll herself up, put on a little something from Victoria's Secret, and go find Boaz after he's had a good meal and some down time with the guys. And uncover his feet. Like the author of Ruth, I'll leave it to your imagination to fill in the details there.

Strange as it may seem to us, apparently what Ruth did was actually a request for Boaz' hand in marriage. And he agrees. Humbly, wholeheartedly, graciously. But it isn't as simple as all that. He doesn't have first dibs on her. Back then it was all in the family, the women and the land. And there was a woman, there was land, and there was a man who was a closer relative than Boaz. And he got the right of first refusal. So what Boaz does is entirely legitimate, but a wee bit conniving as well, kind of like what Naomi had done. Maybe you could say they just expedited the process some. Boaz goes to the other relative and asks if he wants this track of land that Elimelech has left, and of course, the man does. Duh... And so, as Boaz pulls out the deed for the land he casually announces that Ruth, the widow, will make the man one fine wife – and the guy balks. The land, he wants. The wife, not so much. And he can't have one without the other. Boaz is free to marry her.

When you buy DVDs of movies these days you often get interviews and outtakes and things like that, what they call bonus additions to the movie itself. This would have made the perfect end to the story. Ruth and Naomi are saved, they find a home, they won't starve to death. And Ruth finds the love of a good man, someone to rock in the porch swing with and watch the sun go down. But there is a bonus addition to the story. They have a baby, and that baby grows up to be none other than the grandfather of David, and an ancestor of Jesus. The women are saved from certain death, and they become important links in the salvation story. God saves, not only the poor widows, but us.

Except that God is working behind the scenes in this story. You and I catch the author's wink and know that it is God who has accomplished all these things, but it is an invisible hand that brings this salvation about. To the casual observer it looks for all the world like a crafty old woman and her kind and thoughtful daughter-in-law have saved their own hides. And that is the part that always makes me think. A crafty old woman and her compassionate daughter-in-law. And a good and generous old man. Nothing miraculous, nothing heroic. They didn't even get down on their knees and pray about it or ask what God wanted them to do. They acted. Kindly. Compassionately. Extraordinarily generously and selflessly. And yes, with a wee bit of street smarts and cunning mixed in.

Sometimes it looks for all the world like you've come to a dead end. Only sad endings in sight. And there's no word from God. No comfort, no direction, no sign hinting at what you're supposed to do next. No one hands you a book that tells you step-by-step how to salvage your life or keep the sinking boat you're on afloat. Nothing. You don't know what to do or where to go or how to fix things.

Sometimes the only thing left to do is what Naomi and Ruth did. They took matters into their own hands. How? They took care of each other. They loved each other and were kind and compassionate and generous towards each other. They put the other's needs before their own. And in trying to save the other, they were saved.

There are no clear answers in this story. Nothing is certain, not their future, not the path they should take. And nobody's giving them answers. Life is like that sometimes. You just don't know what you are supposed to do; where you are supposed to go, how to pull yourself up from the Pit. Ruth's surprising answer? When in doubt, love your neighbor. Generously, selflessly, extravagantly. Be God's invisible hand in an exciting story of salvation.