

Desperate Times
Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Stewardship Sunday
November 8, 2015
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Text: Ruth 3
Psalm 146
Hebrews 9:24-28
Mark 12:38-44

Well, this is awkward—a Gospel passage that warns us to beware of people who walk around in long robes and are prone to long prayers. Now, I’m not in charge of the prayer today (Gordon...), but I will do my best to steer clear of pomposity and pretension in the sermon.

It’s just as well, then, that our OT lesson comes by way of three characters without an ounce of pretension: two widows and a farmer—namely, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. Which just goes to show that *wisdom is where you find it*. And in this story, wisdom cries out to us—not from the marketplace or the academy—but from the margins.

I’d like to chart our course through this story by focusing on 3 C’s: Courage, Compassion, and –well, I’m going to wait to tell you what the 3rd “C” is. I think I’ll just let you wonder about it for a while. So—courage, compassion, and the “mystery C.”

First: Courage. There’s certainly no shortage of it in this chapter. Ruth comes to mind right away. I mean really. If your mother-in-law asked YOU to tip-toe down to a secluded spot and lie down next to someone who had been “eating and drinking and was in a contented mood”—would YOU go? I would have to think very hard about that. So, Ruth gets credit for courage.

But Naomi deserves some credit as well. To appreciate this, we need to rewind the story a bit and review where she was at the end of chapter 2. To put it bluntly, she was at the edge of despair. And who could blame her? She had lost her husband, her sons, and pretty much all of her hope. She and her foreign daughter-in-law (arguably more of a burden than a blessing) have become refugees—fleeing a famine that affects not just their stomachs but their wombs. Listen to what she says to her former neighbors when she and Ruth stagger into town:

Call me no longer Naomi (Pleasant), call me Mara (Bitter),
For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty (1:20-21a).

Wow, Naomi—tell us how you REALLY feel.... This is bitterness with a capital “B.” She is quite literally “desperate”—*de spera*—without hope. Or at least, she thinks she is.

God, it seems has other ideas. When Ruth comes home with a bushel of grain and a doggie bag of left-overs from lunch, we see the first glimmer of hope in Naomi’s eyes. “Where did you glean today?” she asks her daughter-in-law. The answer to both the question and, quite possibly, their prayers is: Boaz. It’s Boaz’s field. Naomi recognizes Boaz as a close relative of her dead husband—and thus someone who was qualified—and in that culture—obligated to give these refugees a home and a family. Hearing Boaz’ name is just enough to bring Naomi back from the brink. Times are not, evidently, quite as “desperate” as she’d thought. And that little spark of hope is all it takes to re-ignite her courage.

It’s time for the second “C”: Compassion. Again, it’s hard to top Ruth when it comes to compassion. The Hebrew for compassion is often paired with the word is *hesed*—that’s love that goes above and beyond the call of duty. And that’s exactly what Ruth does when she refuses to leave her mother-in-law in chapter one—even though it means leaving her home to become a refugee. When she tells Naomi, “Where you die, I will die,” she’s not speaking metaphorically. So I guess that counts for both *courage* and *compassion*.

But I’d like to look to Boaz for compassion as well—in part, because he’s not usually given much credit for it. A couple of months pass, you see, between the time he sends Ruth home from his field with all that grain and the doggie bag. Time goes by and he doesn’t propose to Ruth. That delay makes both Naomi and the biblical commentators impatient. One commentator even says that Boaz is “slow at best and irresponsible at worst.” But I’m not sure that’s fair.

To fully appreciate the scale of Boaz’ compassion, we need to ask, “Why does he delay? Why is he so slow to take responsibility for his kinswomen?” The answer to that question becomes clear in the celebrated scene at the threshing floor that we read for today.

I should warn you. This is the point where the sermon gets a PG rating. So parents—you may want to cover your children’s ears for the next few minutes. You know, of course, that I have just guaranteed that listeners of all ages will now be listening very carefully indeed! (Clever me. You’ve got to watch out for those people in long robes! I read that somewhere....)

There is a lot of very suggestive language in chapter 3. It's harder to see in English, but in Hebrew, it's impossible to miss. So the commentators often rush to conclude that Ruth and Boaz consummate their relationship that night at the threshing floor. But any self-respecting English major will tell you that just because the author wants us to *think* about sex doesn't mean the characters *have* sex. The whole point of chapter three is that Ruth and Boaz CAN'T have sex. It's not that they don't have a marriage license or a blood test. It's not that they're not attracted to each other; I think they probably are. It's that there is someone more closely related than Boaz—this so-called “nearer kinsman”—and he might as well be sleeping between Ruth and Boaz there in this tantalizingly secluded spot on the threshing floor.

“Why didn't we know about him before?” we protest. I suspect that is exactly what Ruth is wondering. Naomi has certainly given her the impression that Boaz is the relevant relative. But that raises the question: Did Naomi know about him? I suspect she did. What was it she said in chapter two? “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” Oh, Naomi—you're so sneaky! But did Boaz know? Of course he did. He's known all along. And THAT's the explanation for his delay. That and the fact that he's a little insecure. Did you catch that? What does he say to Ruth in this scene? “Bless you, my daughter...you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.” Picture an older Jimmy Stewart in the role of Boaz: “Aw, shucks, ma'am....”

Boaz is slow to take responsibility for Ruth and Naomi because he *can't* take responsibility. There's someone in line ahead of him. And when the author reveals that fact—like a rabbit out of a hat—it puts all of Boaz' previous generosity in a new light. He has gone out of his way to give the two refugees food and protection—even though it turns out that there was *nothing in it for him*. “What a guy!” we realize—and now the violins really start to play. He's perfect for Ruth because they are both people of incredible compassion—going above and beyond the call of duty even when there is nothing in it for them.

All right. We've covered COURAGE, and now COMPASSION. What's the 3rd “C”? It's **COINCIDENCE**.

Now, we need to qualify this somewhat—being Calvinists, after all. It's probably more accurate to call this “Divine coincidence,” because as Frederick Buechner reminds us, “a coincidence is just God's way of remaining anonymous.” And God has chosen to remain scrupulously anonymous in this book. Yet, if we look carefully—just out of the corner of our eye—we can catch a glimpse of how God is working in these characters' lives. Ruth just “happens” into Boaz' field. Boaz lies down in a secluded spot and in a contented mood. This whole story could have gone very differently if he'd lain down in a crowd or had too much to drink or been suffering from indigestion. In chapter 4—which I hope you'll all run home and read—the “nearer

kinsman” just happens to wander up to the city gate so that Boaz can argue him out of his place at the front of the line. Coincidences are everywhere. And they are hints that God is with us—and God is working—even when we can only catch a glimpse of God out of the corner of our eye.

I said at the outset that we would be taught today by two widows and a farmer. Perhaps you’ve already begun to understand the lessons they offer for our lives. But let’s make a few of those lessons explicit.

Naomi thinks that her situation is hopeless. She feels “desperate.” But that’s because she sees from a human point of view. Of course she does. Don’t we all? Novelist George Eliot once wrote that we all “walk around well-wadded in stupidity.” True enough. But from God’s point of view, there is every reason to hope. Even though Naomi is sure that God has abandoned her, God has been working behind the scenes in ways she never imagined. When she finally catches a glimpse of this, she finds new courage—and one could argue—some chutzpah as well. (That’s a fourth “C”!) It nudges us to ask: How might God be working in unseen ways in your life? In our life together? In our world? What’s that line from the hymn? “Ye saints of God, fresh courage take—the clouds you so much dread are rich with mercy and shall break with blessings on your head.” Courage.

Boaz and Ruth remind us of what true *compassion* looks like. It goes above and beyond the call of duty. It’s done quietly, with no thought for selfish gain or with a view toward winning a community service award. It has keen eyes—eyes that notice the hurt that it can help, even if that help consists of small gestures of generosity.

I have been quite deliberate in describing Ruth and Naomi as refugees. That’s partly because they are—and partly because I want us to remember them when we see those heartbreaking images of contemporary refugees and immigrants. If you’re like me, it’s easy to get overwhelmed by those images. Or even worse, to become used to them—numbed by the frequency of the horror.

Again, I’m reminded of that famous passage from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. She’s talking about how “we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual.” And then she says,

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heartbeat, and we would die of that roar that lives on the other side of silence.

I think that only God can listen fully to that roar that lives on the other side of silence. But God is God—and we are not. So the first thing God calls is to do, it seems to me, is *simply not to turn away*. And then God asks us to act with compassion—without thought for recognition or illusions of being able to fix the whole problem. If we could just fix what’s right in front of us—that would be a start. It would be a start just to get out of the abstract and into the particular—to fix what’s under our noses.

It occurs to me that the story of Ruth is beautiful, in part, precisely *because* of its particularity. These refugees have names—Ruth and Naomi. When we see the images on television or hear politicians discussing the “refugee crisis,” one of the things to remember is that these desperate people have names—they have stories. And the stories are as rich and varied and surprising as any of our own.

Speaking of surprises--I would be remiss if I didn’t point out the surprise ending to today’s Bible story. In the last few verses of the book, the author pulls one more rabbit out of the hat: It turns out that Ruth and Boaz have a son, and—what a surprise—that child becomes the grandfather of King David—and thus, an ancestor of Jesus. It seems there was a whole lot more riding on this little romance than we realized!

Isn’t THAT a coincidence? Or maybe not....

Perhaps the final bit of wisdom we can glean from this story is to keep our eyes peeled for those divine coincidences. Because they remind us that our times are in God’s hands—and as such, are not as “desperate” we may have imagined.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.