

Season after Pentecost

Summer Sermon Series: Ruth II

July 19/20, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 139: 1-12; Ruth 2 - 3: 5

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

Several people we met on our mission trip to Warrensburg, New York mentioned the important work of some modern day “gleaners.” Several days each week these men and women visit businesses in the area — Wal-Mart, grocery stores, Panera Bread – and collect the items they are throwing away. These goods are being tossed because they are imperfect, day-old or in some other way no longer able to be sold. The “gleaners” take their bounty to area soup kitchens, food pantries and local hunger endeavors. Their efforts recall the Lord’s directive in the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus:

“When you reap the harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.” (Deut. 24:19)

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.... you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev. 19: 9-10)

Gleaning was one way God’s people were to be an extension of God’s mercy and care for the orphans, widows, refugees and destitute.

When we pick up our story of Ruth and Naomi, they are widows and destitute. Naomi has returned to her homeland after the tragic deaths of her husband and two sons in Moab. She is grieving, calls herself “bitter” and says the LORD turned against her. I wish you never have to walk in Naomi’s shoes but many of us have. Ever been

unconsolable? Angry and despondent at the same time? Thought God uncaring or unresponsive?

Beside Naomi is daughter-in-law Ruth, whose husband also died. Amid her losses, she chose to stay with Naomi and care for her. Ruth left her family, country and local gods to come as an alien in a strange country among people who may likely reject her and to worship a God she does not fully know. Ruth is able to see that gleaning is more than gathering someone else's scraps and leftovers. Gleaning will save them from starvation and open doors into hope. Gleaning was a simple step toward trusting there was something else, something good still possible in their sorrowful lives.

The first chapter of Ruth ended by telling us "They came to Bethlehem [which means "house of bread" in Hebrew] at the beginning of the barley harvest." (1:22b) Shut down Naomi doesn't see what that means. But Ruth sees a glimmer of promise. She announces she will go glean in nearby fields to gather enough grain to feed them both. It is very hard work to glean grain. But Ruth will also need courage for remember, she is a foreigner, a Moabite, more likely to be dismissed or harassed by local landowners and workers. "As it happened" Ruth finds she is gleaning in the fields belonging to a wealthy, prominent man related to Naomi through her husband's side of the family. Boaz enters into the story.

We meet him greeting his workers with a blessing. Without haughty bluster or reproach, Boaz quietly inquires about this new woman gleaning in his fields. The man supervising the reapers explains she is the Moabite who came to Bethlehem with Naomi. He states she had asked for permission to glean and had been working without rest for many hours. Boaz speaks kindly to Ruth, welcomes her to glean in his fields and

drink from the water his workers have drawn. He seeks to protect her from harm or reproach. Boaz will later invite her to share a meal and instructs his men to purposefully leave extra grain behind for her to gather. We quickly learn that Boaz is an honorable and compassionate man of God who has heart for this younger woman and her plight.

Ruth bows before Boaz, in respect and gratitude, asking why he has shown her, a foreigner, such favor. Boaz recounts Ruth's kindnesses to Naomi and the sacrifices Ruth has made to be faithful to her mother-in-law. He offers a prayer and a blessing: "May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge." You may have heard it said, "Be careful what you pray for." But in the case of Boaz, we are reminded that when we pray, we very well may become part of God's answer to that prayer.

Ruth goes back to Naomi with an astonishing amount of barley — 2/3rds of a bushel, something like 30 pounds — and tells her about Boaz and his generosity. Light begins to break through Naomi's despair. Maybe just a flicker at first. But it is Naomi who first recognizes this turn of events as God's blessing, "Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Dare she believe that God has not abandoned her or Ruth after all? Can she believe again in the LORD's loving kindness?

Twice in this chapter we are told that Boaz is not only a relative but the nearest kinsman-redeemer - the go'el — for Naomi and now Ruth. The go'el was the nearest relative who had both the right and responsibility to restore the rights of another and avenge any wrongs. In this case, the go'el would see that the widow was not destitute. If the go'el was the brother-in-law of a childless widow, the custom would be that he marry

his sister-in-law and their first child would become the deceased husband's heir. As a more distant relative, Boaz is not under obligation to marry either widow. But Boaz begins to take an active interest in their well being. Is he motivated by duty, an attraction to Ruth, his own strong sense of loyalty and compassion or a combination of all? We are not told. We do see in Boaz both the reflection and enactment of God's own faithfulness and generosity — even to a foreigner.

Ruth continues to glean fields through the barley and wheat harvests which would usually spread over two months. Over that time, it appears that Naomi has slowly found some of her emptiness being filled by Ruth's care and the twinkle of a plan to provide for Ruth's future. Naomi decides to take matters in to her own matchmaking hands.

The harvested grain needs to be winnowed, separating the grains from the unneeded chaff. This would be done at the threshing floor, a large recessed area for that purpose which was usually the domain of men. Naomi tells Ruth to shower up, put on her best clothes and alluring perfume. She tells Ruth to go to Boaz at the threshing floor in the night, after he is contentedly asleep after his evening wine and meal. Ruth is to slip under his blanket and do whatever he says. *(Insert knowing laughter here)* It's a bold and perhaps dangerous plan. It is greatly dependent on the integrity and character of Boaz and his high opinion of Ruth's own qualities of righteousness and loyalty. If Naomi's plan goes wrong — if she has misjudged Boaz's character --- it could mean rape or disgrace for Ruth. Yet, trusting Naomi's knowledge of the customs of her homeland and her intentions, Ruth agrees: "All that you tell me I will do."

The tide is turning. Naomi who announced she had come back to Bethlehem empty, is being filled – not only with gleaned food but with more. She began to really see Ruth as the gift of God that she was. Ruth cared for her when she didn't care much about herself or living. Ruth saw hope in the leftover grains she could glean and the kindness of Boaz. Somewhere during that barley and wheat harvest, Naomi began to show interest in life again — in Ruth, her experiences in the fields, her interactions with her kinsman Boaz ... maybe even the future. That's how surviving loss is as God continues to hold on to us. We put one step before the other, day in and day out and slowly begin to notice a glimpse of beauty, acts of kindness and moments of hope once again.... in time, awakening to the presence of blessings.

There is little direct mention of the mighty works of God in this book of Ruth. But there is no doubt that we are seeing that some of God's most amazing, awesome work is accomplished through the likes of faithful people like Ruth, Naomi, Boaz and you and me — through people who open themselves to receive and enact God's very own love and grace in the way they live their lives. Thanks be to God.

Linda M Alessandri 7/19/14

REFERENCES - Posted on www.workingpreacher.org

Rolf Jacobson, "An Earthy Story" Ruth 3: 1-18 preached April 16, 2012 at Luther Seminary

Kathryn Schifferdecker, "Commentary on Ruth 1:1 - 4:22"

Brett A. Strawn, "Commentary on Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17"

Patricia Tull, "Commentary on Ruth 3: 1-5; 4: 13-17"