

Ruth: New Life
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ruth 4:1-22

We were on our way back from another family vacation in Maine. Traffic had been bad and we were anxiously anticipating the Carlton service plaza. The only problem was that everyone else on the road with us seemed to want to stop there.

So we decided to grab some fast food from McDonalds to eat on the road. Once inside, I saw a large number of grumbling people waiting in one line on the left and a shorter, faster moving line on the right. So I went to the shorter line and put in my order.

Once I did that, I realized that the large group that was next to me weren't putting in their orders, but waiting for them! Everyone was angry. Some people went up to get their money back. Some went to those in the line making their order to warn others. But most waited there making friends with others who were in the same predicament, *because it's good to have community in a crisis.*

Apparently, the reason for the delay was because they were short on staff. Finally we got our order... 35 minutes later. This was supposed to be fast food! Looking back on it, we lost some travel time and it was frustrating, but it was really not a big deal. We made it home safely without any food poisoning. I am sure there are longer lines in places around our world where hungry people wait for a cup of rice. First World Problems, right?

The older I get, the more I realize that our culture is one that focuses on the immediate. Instant gratification. We all want instant meals, instant replies to a text, instant connection to the internet, instant help as we wait for customer service or in a check-out line.

What can I get right now?

What I can I feel right now?

What works for me right now?

And yet, again and again, the counter cultural Word of God seems to want to teach us about patience and waiting. Today I am excited to finish our short summer sermon series on the book of Ruth. It has been an interesting journey traveling with these two widows. In the first chapter, we saw that God was in their wandering and in their weeping. In the second and third chapters, we saw God bringing poor Ruth to the fields of Boaz and allowing them to meet at the right time. It has seemed like a long time to get to this point.

Now we are going to see the results of all this waiting. What is the masterpiece that is created when God brings our tangled threads of life together? What is the end result when God's people step out in faith and live their lives trusting in God?

In today's reading, we see two laws come into play. One is called the kinsman redeemer law¹ and the other is the levirate marriage law². The purpose of following both was to keep the name of the deceased alive in the land. For a widow, the nearest relative is supposed to step up and buy the land along with marrying the widow and keeping the name of the family alive. In this case, although Boaz is interested in marrying Ruth, there is someone else ahead of him in the line. As a man of exemplary character, he will do it the right way and ask this man first.

He wastes no time. The early morning was a busy time at the city gate. One can imagine the area abuzz with chattering citizens getting ready for another day of work. Several benches lined right along the walls. Like a modern town square or plaza, it was both a marketplace and a civic center. You would also do your legal transactions there.

And would you look at that, there comes the kinsman redeemer! Just as Boaz sits down, he walks by at just the right moment. Boaz takes a deep breath and calls out to him to have a seat.

Being a man of influence and stature, Boaz recognized the Bethlehem town elders as they passed through the crowd on their way to work, and he summoned them one by one to come and sit down. You can sense determination and authority in his voice.

The narrator wants us to know that everything was done legally. These men would serve as witnesses, not adjudicators. There was no crime committed;

¹ Lev 25:23-34

² Deut 25:5-10

this was just a family issue. So Boaz and Mr. So-and-So would go at it and once they decide on the matter, the elders would serve as the witnesses. Boaz begins the discussion very formally with the land issue. He informs the kinsman that since Naomi has returned well past sowing time she cannot use her land for any income and thus is on the verge of selling it.

The sad part about this is that this kinsman had done nothing since Naomi and Ruth returned. No stopping by to see how they are doing. No leftover meals to bring to them. No consideration whatsoever. Nothing. I wonder what Boaz thought of this guy? Now he is being forced to take responsibility.

Boaz tells him that if he is willing he should redeem the land. To everyone's surprise, the kinsman redeemer says yes in greedy anticipation. This was a win-win situation for him. He can develop the land into a profitable lot earn more income. The inheritance of his heirs would be enlarged. His reputation would be enhanced. I can picture him grinning from ear to ear.

But Boaz is not grinning. Naomi and Ruth (who are likely standing in that crowd) get worried. Ruth clutches Naomi's arm. We, the audience, are not grinning. Romance is crushed by legality. Yet another setback! Boaz then reads the fine print... and here's the pivotal point of the story.

Boaz leans forward and says, "There is one thing, however." He continues, "Ruth the Moabite," motioning to her in the crowd, "comes with the property. When you acquire the property, she comes with it. And when you have children with her, they will keep the family name alive."

Is he willing to pay the price? Boaz is really saying: nothing is free. Do you have what it takes to do this? Will you live into your responsibilities? Now comes the moment of truth. What will the kinsman say? The place is quiet. The camera zooms in to his face. Ruth can feel her heart racing.

All of a sudden he says, "I cannot do it." By his word choice, he stresses not his unwillingness, but his inability to act. He says in essence, "I cannot afford it." Any addition to the man's family would ruin his children's inheritance. He would lose that investment when Ruth's first child claims it as Elimelech's heir. Meanwhile, the child's care and feeding and that of his mother and grandmother would further drain his wealth.

And who knows... we are not sure (because the text doesn't say), but he may not have wanted to have Moabite blood running through his family.

Taking this all into consideration, he is not willing to take a chance on them without a guarantee of a personal payout. "Forget it! YOU do it" he says. The people in the crowd start whispering among themselves. He took the easy way out.

But to be honest, I am convicted by this guy because I know I can become like him if I am not careful. I can easily get into a routine where I'm just going through the motions and not following Jesus' way. But there's a danger to indifference! I don't want to just get by, clinging to what I have. And yet, there is a price to pay for a legacy: time and resources, energy and devotion.

Back to our story... The Narrator pauses to explain the symbolic custom that was about to take place. Apparently, to symbolize a land transaction, a person's sandal was removed and given to the person who received the rights. So he bends down and quickly unties the sandal and hands it to Boaz, publicly validating the transaction. The passing of the sandal symbolized Boaz's right to walk on the land as his property³.

"Buy it for yourself!" Mr. No Name gets up and walks off (which must be uncomfortable with just one sandal), pushing through the crowd. He exits the story and we never hear from him again.

At this point, I picture Naomi grabbing Ruth's hand and whispering, "He did it! I knew he would." I wonder if Boaz snuck a quick glance at Ruth at this moment? I can see her looking down quickly after their eyes met. There is a glimmer in his eye, though outwardly he looks so professional.

Gripping the sandal firmly in hand, he stands up and makes a speech recalling Ruth's double misfortune: her non-Israelite ethnicity and her tragic widowhood. But he will redeem her. And this is the last time she will be called a Moabite. She will soon be a citizen.

The first child born to Ruth and Boaz would own Elimelech's family property and keep him and his sons alive in association with it. Naomi's poor grieving family will survive. Eventually, that child's descendant will be Jesus of Nazareth.

As Kate Huey points out in the UCC's weekly seeds commentary, *"It is not insignificant that Boaz was inspired by Ruth's goodness to do something good himself. Her fidelity inspired his fidelity."*

³ cf. Deut. 1:36; 11:24; Josh. 1:3; 14:9

Do you hear that? Ruth's fidelity to Naomi inspired Boaz's fidelity to Ruth. Ruth's devotion toward Naomi inspired Boaz's devotion toward Ruth. Ruth's steadfastness and strength and compassion and generosity in the face of cultural challenges inspired Boaz. That's the fullness of Ruth's story that I want our church to remember.

The fullness of the story of the Monroe Congregational Church is that new life can be found in people who choose each other. We are people who come from all walks of life, from different tribes and families of origin, from different backgrounds and denominations, from different histories and (dare I say it) political leanings. And yet, somehow in this fractured world, we commit to each other. Sure, we have disagreements. We have differing opinions and passions. We have congregational meetings where our myriad perspectives and dreams fly around the room like popcorn.

But at the end of the day, we still choose each other. We still commit to each other and remain devoted and faithful. When we do so, we live into this fidelity and devotion and commitment that is the full story of Ruth, and the full story of Jesus of Nazareth, and the full story of all the Saints (and many of the Sinners) who've gone on before us. And it's that fidelity and devotion and commitment which helps us to keep writing a pretty cool story. Amen.