

Oct 20

Take the Initiative

Ruth 2:1-8, 3:1-9

Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. I am sure their arrival caused quite a stir. First, you have Naomi returning without her husband and two sons who have all died. This once prosperous member of the community is now a widow, without anyone to take care of her. Is the house she once lived in still available, or has another moved in? Does she have money to purchase food or will she be begging? Does she expect her extended family to take care of her? Lots of questions. And even more, she has brought a Moabite woman with her. People from Moab were the enemy, beneath them. They learn the shocking details that both of Naomi's sons had married Moabite wives. Many would assume that their deaths were a punishment from God. Most had never met someone from there and now they have one living in their midst. Would the women of Bethlehem be expected to talk to her at the well? Stories of how they were seducers would raise concerns as well. Did you trust her to be around the men of the village? Yes, Naomi's homecoming would have been anything but quiet and serene.

We are told that it happened right at the time of the harvest. It seems that the rains had returned, there was to be a plentiful harvest, and famine no longer stalked the land. Widows were allowed to glean, which seems to be Naomi and Ruth's only way to get food so they won't starve. We will learn that this seeming hardship is actually a blessing because in gleaning Ruth will encounter Boaz.

We need to understand that there is lots of ambiguity in this next part of the tale. The writer leaves a lot unspoken and we are challenged to fill in the blanks. Some pieces of the story are delayed to heighten the suspense. It is some of the best writing in the Old Testament.

We need to begin by putting Ruth and Naomi into the context of their social and economic situation. Widowed women without sons had very little legal standing. Any property Naomi's husband Elimelech had owned would often be considered the property of his nearest relative, a piece of the drama to come. Since her sons were dead, Naomi had no one who would be legally bound to take care of her. She would

have to rely on the kindness of her kin, hope her near relations would provide and, until then, she and Ruth would need to beg or glean to stay alive.

Ruth goes out to glean and it is in the field of Boaz. The storyteller leaves Boaz's close connection to Naomi a secret until Naomi reveals it. There is ambiguity in the text as to whether or not Ruth knew of this relationship before gleaning in that field. How you fill in that blank colors a lot of the rest of the story.

Ruth is gleaning when Boaz arrives from town. He notices her and asks about her. He finds out that she is the woman from Moab who has returned with Naomi. He shows kindness to her. There is ambiguity again as to why he does this. Is it because he knows he has some responsibility towards Naomi, who is part of his clan? Is it because he likes what he sees? Again, you have to decide. Anyway, he gives her permission to glean in his fields, makes sure the harvesters leave plenty for her to find, gives her permission to drink from the water jugs brought for his harvesters, tells her to stay near the other women and, it would seem, reminds his men to be kind to her. As a widow and a foreigner, she was very vulnerable. His protection was crucial. Then, at the end of the day, after she has threshed what she has gleaned, he adds to the amount before sending her home to Naomi

It is only then that we learn of the close relationship between Naomi and Boaz. Now Naomi takes the initiative, like other strong women in the Old Testament, and comes up with a plan to get Boaz to marry Ruth. Ruth is to dress in her finest and wait for Boaz to have eaten and drunk his fill and then go to him when he lays down for the night. In this part of the story there is a clustering together of so many terms that have both innocent and sexually suggestive connotations that it must be considered a deliberate narrative ploy. You are left to decide what happens on the threshing floor!

You are also left with the question about Ruth's motives. Does Ruth merely encourage a hesitant Boaz to follow his own inclinations or does the plan formulated by Naomi and carried out by Ruth constitute entrapment? Does Boaz ultimately marry Ruth because he wants to or because he has to? You get to decide.

In answering those questions we also have to decide whether Boaz had a moral or legal obligation to do something about Naomi's situation. If we decide that he had some obligation towards her, then we must ask why he had failed to do anything. It makes him much less noble. Then what Ruth did was to prick his conscience. If he was under no legal obligation, then his actions were truly that of hesed, kindness. Some want to suggest that there might have been even more twists and turns to the plot. Boaz might have been smitten by Ruth, but perhaps had to work through why he was attracted to a Moabite girl, which was definitely something that others in the village would have frowned upon. If this was the reason, perhaps he used the law of redemption to justify his actions to a skeptical community. He wasn't legally required to marry her but this law would allow him to cross those social boundaries more easily. Why did he want to marry Ruth? So many questions!!!

What does all this say to us today? We are not supposed to be passive in the work of God. God is willing to help us, God is encouraging us, and God is sending people to support us, but we have a part to play. If Ruth had sat home with Naomi waiting for some neighbor to come and bring them food, they likely would have starved to death. She instead went to work gleaning. In that work she found God was also at work doing more than she would have thought possible. But it was her initiative that got things moving. Later, we see Naomi setting up plans to force the hand of Boaz. As I said, how you interpret his feelings makes a lot of difference as to how you interpret Naomi's actions. This story seems to be a reminder that we have a brain and we are to use it. We need to think through possibilities and be open to the opportunities God has given us. And then we are to act and not just be passive about our fate.

We too often complain that God is not helping us when we have not taken any initiative. We always, in working with others, have to think about the difference between a hand out and a hand up. Yes, as a church, sometimes we just give a hand out but most of what we are called to do is walk beside people and encourage them and support them, not doing it for them. When people take some initiative for their situation the results are always more positive.

Think about your life right now. Where are you stuck? Where are you wishing God would help you with a situation? Is there anything you can do about it? Is there a first step, no matter how disagreeable it might be, that you can take?

That is the other part of the story. The steps we sometimes need to take are not always comfortable ones for us. Think about how hard it was for Ruth to go out into the fields to glean. She would face prejudice for her race, suspicion because she was a stranger and the threat of sexual attack because she was a vulnerable woman. It would have been much safer to stay at home with Naomi. But, harvest was happening, they needed to eat, so she plucked up her courage and went out the door.

God sometimes wants us to take some initiative in our situation. Sometimes we are challenged to accept situations that we do not want but we are always reminded that God is with us and loves us. And when we are open God sometimes blesses us more than we could ever hope for.