

“REDEEMER”

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

November 7, 2021

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On this All Saints’ Sunday, we are remembering and giving thanks for all the saints – most especially those who were part of this church and who died in the last year. But it’s also a day for lifting up our gratitude for *all* the saints. Not saints in the sense of those formally canonized by a church structure as having a uniquely close bond to God and miraculous stories of divine intervention – but *all* the saints – all the faithful people who have gone before us, the ones whose names are known, and the ones whose names are unknown, who loved God and sought to live faithful lives.

In today’s reading from Ruth, we have a story of some of our ancestors in faith, a story that is in places somewhat off-color, in places sort of humorous, but full of kindness, compassion, and mercy. Last week we talked about how the unlikely pair of Ruth and Naomi had become and remained family together. Naomi is an Israelite whose family had fled Bethlehem to the despised land of Moab because of a family, and Ruth a Moabite who had married Naomi’s son. But all the men of the family had died, leaving Naomi and Ruth – mother-in-law and daughter-in-law – widowed. Naomi had tried to send her daughters-in-law back to their families of origin, but Ruth had chosen to stay, throwing her lot in with Naomi.

Ruth is a short book, just four chapters. Last week we heard a section from the first chapter; in the intervening section between last week’s reading and today’s, the two women return to Bethlehem. They are aware that there are some kinsmen there who might help keep them from destitution, but there’s a lot that could go wrong – people didn’t always have the capacity or the willingness to fulfill those kinds of obligations, and if these kinsmen are not righteous men, it might be better not to even try. Ruth goes out to the fields to glean – according to Torah law, people were commanded not to harvest from the edges of their fields, so that widows and other poor people could subsist by gathering up the extra grain. Ruth goes to glean in the field of Boaz, one of the kinsmen (the names throughout this book are symbolic, and Boaz’s name means “strength”). Thankfully, he is a kind and caring figure, who ensures that his workers treat her

with respect, and that she gets what she needs. Ruth likely wondered what this distant relative would think of a Moabite gleaning on his land, but he references God's call to Abraham, saying: "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds."

Having seen that Boaz is a good man, Ruth returns to Naomi to report on all that has happened, and that's where today's reading picks up. Naomi helps Ruth make a plan to go to Boaz at night on the threshing-floor. There are some connotations and some euphemisms in this part of the story which are... rated PG-13, if that. This is a scene of seduction – Naomi is coaching Ruth to make a pass at this kind and wealthy man. Ruth does, and it works, but the honorable Boaz notes that there actually is a closer kinsman who should be consulted first before Boaz can move forward. Ruth returns to Naomi to wait.

Then there are some verses describing Boaz's next steps: he goes to find the closest kin of Naomi, the one who has the right to "redeem" the widows by marrying Ruth, taking over the familial property, and fathering children to inherit and continue the family line. He informs this next-of-kin that Naomi has sold away a piece of land that belonged to Elimelech, and that this man is the next-of-kin who has the right to buy back the land, taking ownership of it and returning it to the clan. Does he want to redeem the field? The relative replies that he does want to redeem the field. Ah, Boaz continues, but this field comes with a widow. Is he willing to marry the widow? The man replies that he does not want the widow, so he declines the field.

Boaz is now free to marry Ruth, and that's where the lectionary reading picks up, with Boaz marrying Ruth, the women of the town praising and blessing the name of the Lord, and Ruth bearing a son named Obed ("worshipper"), who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, the great king of Israel. And in the Gospel narratives, when we see the genealogy of Jesus, tracing his lineage back through King David and beyond, the name of Ruth appears, reminding us of the story of Ruth, of welcoming the foreigner and caring for the poor and embodying the love of God.

People sometimes say to me about something frightening or troubling, "It's all in God's hands." And sometimes I agree: there are things that are all in God's hands. But there are things that are not entirely in God's hands; there are things that are in our hands as well. Imagine if Ruth had

said to Naomi, “well, we are terribly hungry, but it’s all in God’s hands.” Instead, she summoned her resourcefulness and ventured out to try to do what she could to care for her mother-in-law and herself. Or perhaps Boaz could have said, “My kinsmen have died, and their wives are widowed, and that’s so sad, and so tragic – I guess it’s all in God’s hands.” Instead, he extended care to them first as Ruth gleaned in his fields, and then by taking on the role of redeemer.

There are things that are out of our control – some of them because they are in the hands of another human whom we hope will do the right thing; some because they are truly in God’s hands. But there are things that are in our hands – sometimes we are the ones who have resources, or have choices, or have the ability to make a difference – to be the saints who do the work of God. To feed the hungry and care for the poor and comfort the grieving. There’s a quote attributed to St. Theresa of Avila that goes, “Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, ... Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. ... Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

On this All Saints Sunday, we give thanks for those in our own lives and those throughout the ages who have been the hands and feet of Christ in this world. Who have said not “it’s in God’s hands,” but “I’ll do the work that God has put in *my* hands.” For the people we know, and the ones we don’t, for the ones whose names are famous, and the ones whose names are now known only by God, we give thanks. May God give us hearts and minds and hands to carry the light, to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world, for as long as we’re blessed to be in the world, until someday we join the saints on the other side.

Amen.