

“Threshing Things Out”

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First Presbyterian Church
August 24, 2014**

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 7:7-11

Old Testament Lesson: Ruth 3:1-18

Two weeks ago in the first of our sermons on the Book of Ruth, we saw how God calls us to persevere even amid loss and uncertainty. (Naomi the Israelite and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth were widowed in the far-off land of Moab, and yet they hung in there with each other, traveling back to Bethlehem in Judah to seek the grace and mercy of the Lord. Naomi needs to find a relative there who will share God’s blessings with them.)

In our second sermon, we saw how God indeed does calls us to share the blessings we receive, as Naomi and Ruth find a relative named Boaz and he lets Ruth gather food from his field. Thus, we, too, are challenged to see all that we have as a blessing from God and, what’s more, to part with it – even if we’ve worked hard to get it – in order to help those in need.

And now we find Naomi and Ruth still struggling to make their way among the Israelites in Judah. I mean it’s been seven months –the entire harvest season– since Boaz showed any interest in Ruth, this foreigner from Moab who came back to Judah with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

If at the outset these two women were hoping Boaz would be the answer to their prayers, it sure doesn’t look like it now. Seven months and no action! What’s God doing!?! Does God actually want to leave these two poor widows destitute, living hand to mouth with Ruth working from sun up to sun down? No way to get food other than by scraping together any leftover grain after the wealthy landowners harvested all they want? Is this what God wants for them?

Naomi was once married to a wealthy property owner named Elimelech! His property is still there in Judah for the taking! But only if Naomi can figure out a way to reclaim it. You see, in Israel, when someone like Elimelech dies without a son to inherit his property, his wife or daughters would have to marry back into the family line. And if they could not, they had no claim to his property or wealth. This is the situation for Naomi and Ruth. Could God actually be happy with this!?!

When our lives are spiraling out of control and it seems that God has abandoned us to a dismal fate, is there anything we can or should be doing to recover and get back on track? These are Naomi’s questions. So she decides to find out. She decides to nudge the situation a bit and see if God would indeed bring blessings upon her and her daughter-in-law.

She sends Ruth to Boaz at night hoping to rekindle the spark they shared seven months earlier when she and Ruth first arrived in Judah. That's kind of manipulative, isn't it? I mean she doesn't just innocently inquire if Boaz might have feeling for Ruth. (Oh, and by the way, Boaz is a close enough relative of Naomi's late husband to secure their future if he would marry Ruth. Then Naomi and Ruth would have access to her late husband's inheritance.) But as I said, this doesn't look like an innocent affair that Naomi is orchestrating. After all, she tells Ruth to get herself all fixed up, saying, "... Wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes..." Then she sends Ruth to the threshing-floor where Boaz is, which back then was a place of prostitution, as well as a place of honest work. And she tells Ruth to wait until Boaz is full of food and wine and is snoozing, and to then lie down at his feet. Actually, she says, "... go and uncover his feet and lie down," which actually means uncover the lower half of his body. No, this is no innocent affair. Or is it?

This chapter in the story of Ruth is intentionally written with lots of double meanings, leaving us to wonder what, in fact, is *just innocent behavior* and what is sinful. That's kind of hard to figure out in our own lives, too, isn't it? At what point does having a couple of glasses of wine or beer in a social setting become too much? Is it OK to drive 5 or 10 miles over the speed limit, or is that behavior – which many people do – a recipe for disaster? And let's look at sex, since it's implied in our story today. What can you do and not do prior to the "I do's", when it comes to sex and marriage, and with whom can you do it? Not easy questions – though having sex outside of a committed, married relationship is clearly wrong in the sight of God.

But how do we know that!?! One way we know when sex, drinking, speeding or anything else has crossed the line from innocent behavior to sin is by the fruit it produces, by the results that show up when we or other people do such things.

People get hurt and emotions get out of control when sex becomes casual. Lives get ruined because of excessive drinking. Cars crash and people die when traffic laws are ignored. Let's face it, we walk a very thin line between safe, innocent, godly behavior and self-destructive, hurtful and sinful actions. And often, it could go either way. How many of us at some point in our lives have said, "but for the grace of God, go I." Or, "That could have been me." Thank God we don't get what we deserve. Thank God that by God's grace and mercy, we actually get better than we deserve. In the long run, that is.

Why do some people make it through life OK, and others can't seem to get a break? Well, it has everything to do with, "the long run." Those who prosper in life are those willing to take the long-view on life, living life on life's terms, yes, but only by first seeking wisdom and guidance from the Lord. And because living life on life's terms is a messy, unpredictable business, so we need all the help that God gives to us, when we step out in faith and trust in God.

Naomi didn't know what would happen if she sent Ruth to Boaz in the night. She didn't even know if that was the right move. As it turns out, it was. Boaz is willing to marry Ruth and help Naomi reclaim her late husband's property.

He says to Ruth, “I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.” Whether anything sinful happened between Boaz and Ruth that night, we don’t know. That’s just part of the story. And that is just part of our lives.

We often don’t know for sure whether our behaviors are sinful in the eyes of God or not. For those of us who love Jesus, we hope they are not. But even if our actions are sinful and misguided, those of us who have faith in the grace and mercy of the Lord, we know that the Lord can make things right.

We know that if we just keep trying to do the next right thing, God’s will will be done. Even if what we’ve just done is clearly wrong, somewhere, somehow, God is able to find hidden grains of truth. Thus, life is about showing up and doing our best, even though we know that our best is not good enough, even though we know we are prone to sin, even though we all do things contrary to God’s will.

This is what the great theologian Martin Luther meant when he said all people sin, and Christians (quote) “sin boldly.” He said, “God does not save those who are only imaginary sinners. Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong (sin boldly), but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.” Luther often used shocking language with vague meanings to provoke people to deeper faith, deeper thinking.

What Luther meant and what this chapter in Ruth’s life shows us is that those who trust in the Lord, boldly do the things that they do – and some things they do are sinful and some are innocent, and given our sinful nature one can’t always tell the difference. Those who trust in the Lord live life boldly and with confidence, not because they are immune from sin – no one but Christ is – but rather because they trust in the Lord.

Even though Naomi’s actions and instructions to Ruth may have been sinful – and given the double meanings in this story, they actually may have been innocent – remember we don’t know and, as the listeners, we are not supposed to know. Regardless of whether Naomi’s actions were sinful or not – regardless of whether what we do at any one time is sinful or innocent – the important question is ***do you trust in God.***

Do you trust the grace and mercy of our Lord enough to keep moving forward as best you can – not knowing the outcome, not knowing where God is in all of it – but nonetheless confident that God is in control, and that for God, the outcome is certain and just and right.

At the end of this chapter in Ruth, Boaz has gone off to the city to thrash things out with another relative of Naomi; another suitor for Ruth. There’s another man. And he has more right than Boaz to claim Elimelech’s property and wealth on behalf of this poor, widowed Israelite.

How will this all work out? And what is God up to in all of it? For that, you’ll have to return next Sunday, when we conclude our sermon series on Ruth. But suffice it to say, as Christians we have every hope that whatever God is up to, it’s all going to work out to our best interest, to humanities best interest.

We all know this world is not easy. Sin abounds, choices are tough, the way forward is often not known to us. But if we've learned anything today, we've learned that that doesn't mean we can just sit back and take things as they come.

No, we must move forward, and boldly, through life. God can not work in our lives if we refuse to live life fully. And the only way I know of for us to live life fully given our sinful and misguided natures is to do so with confidence that the Lord has it all in hand.

So I invite you to go forth today with such confidence, knowing that you may in fact turn in the wrong direction, but confident that God can and will turn you and all things toward the good – if we keep moving and don't let this world stop us or dampen our faith. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, evidence of your compassionate love is all around us – in a stranger's unexpected kindness, in a caregiver's patience, in a gentle word of encouragement, in generosity of heart, time and resources; in the beauty of a sunrise breaking through the nighttime darkness.

In the midst of a world dominated by self-interest, power and greed, your example teaches us that mercy can triumph over judgment, that acts of peacemaking can restore relationships between men and women, tribes and nations, and God and humankind.

We count on you to foster within us self-respect and respect for others, and to transform our hearts, minds, and souls through the redemptive work of your Spirit.

We praise you that your compassion is boundless, that your love is limitless, and that you never, ever give up on us or anyone else.

May we hold that hope for ourselves and for the world, committing ourselves to enrich, illuminate, and enliven those who we meet along life's journeys, both near and far.

And where our reach is limited, where our resources are too few, our abilities to heal, feed, clothe, and comfort insufficient, we ask for your intervention, Lord.

Your words are spirit and life to us. There are no words that better communicate our need for you and your love than the words you taught to pray, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**