

New Life

By Glenn Brumbaugh

So, we've spent a lot of time the last several weeks talking about how we react when things are going wrong, but what about when things are going right? We often focus so much on the problems we face in life that we can lose track of the many blessings, large and small, that we experience on a daily basis. When we do think of the parts of our life that are working out, to whom do we assign the credit? Do we take credit ourselves, do we credit others? Does God have a role at all? I'm sure most of us would like to think we are responsible for the successes and good fortune we experience in life. After all, it's a hallmark of our culture to be hard-working and independent, to seize life by the reins ourselves and chart our own destiny.

In our story in Ruth, we've journeyed with Ruth and Naomi as they've lost just about everything, and followed them as they devised and carried out a bold plan to reconstruct new life for themselves, a new life full of promise from a life empty of hope. In our reading today, we see the fruition of their plot in the scene at the city gate. It has all payed off. Boaz makes the commit to stand in as their gaol,their redeemer kinsmen. He agrees to redeem the property of Naomi's husband and sons, and by marrying Ruth, Naomi herself. Ruth gives Boaz a son from the union, which the village women proclaim as Naomi's redemption. Naomi is recognized as the maternal figure in the scenario, and this son ensures her security. So while one could argue this was all the result of Naomi's plotting,

can she really take the credit? Would any of what occurred have transpired without the involvement of others? After all, Ruth did the leg work to make everything happen. She went to the threshing floor with Boaz. She initiated the “uncovering,” in whatever fashion that transpired.

Boaz stepped up to the plate, not only in orchestrating the events at the gate, but more importantly, in agreeing to be Naomi’s gaol, her kinsman-redeemer. So while Naomi could be led to think that she can take the credit for her redemption, it’s clear there were many hands involved in what happened. And let’s not forget the Divine hands behind the scenes. Ruth conceives and bears a son off the bat, ensuring an heir. Is this purely luck? Probably not, considering the destiny of this child’s lineage. It’s interesting to note that this child is named Obed, which literally translates as “servant.” And he becomes the grandfather of David, whose descendants will eventually include the ultimate servant leader, Jesus. So, when we experience success, do we give thought, and more importantly credit, to all those hands behind the scenes that played crucial parts in our redemption? Do we even recognize their contribution? In our passage today, Ruth is mentioned briefly and then fades from the rest of the story; she just kind of disappears. Like the first chapter of Ruth, where we are introduced to Naomi’s plight and Ruth makes her appearance as a secondary character, Ruth again is moved out of the limelight and our focus returns to Naomi in this last chapter. So while much of the main action in this story is accomplished through Ruth, it hardly seem fair that she now just drops off of the narrator’s, and therefore the reader’s radar. We are left to pure conjecture as to her fate. Yes, she is now

married to Boaz but all the benefits of that arrangement seem meant for Naomi, even the benefits attained through her own child.

So what is the moral of this story then? What great truth or lesson is our takeaway? One clue can be found in the Hebrew concept of chesed that was introduced in chapter 1 but continues to weave throughout the text. Chesed is that trait of compassion and kindness that leads one to make the choice to come to the aid of someone in crisis. Ruth embodies chesed at the beginning and continues to exemplify that trait throughout the story, as do many other characters. Chesed is all about serving another and ensuring that they are taken care of. In a way, it's a lot like shalom, of caring for the well-being of others. But in Ruth's case, there's a strong element of setting the example for what service to others should look like. Her concern is not for herself, but for her mother-in-law. She could have taken the route of her sister-in-law and sought another husband in her own country. She made the choice to step into the unknown and share the fate of Naomi. Her method of service was based on a selfless compassion.

Jesus stressed repeatedly in his teachings the importance of selfless service to others. The church over the course of its existence has greatly lifted the value of service to others. For some traditions such as our own, serving others is a core part of who we are. We serve others in many ways as well as intentionally celebrating the ritual example set by Jesus with the towel and basin at Love Feast. Yet often our service takes the form of those with means and substance donating charitably to those who lack that power and prestige. Donating time or

resources to charity is certainly laudable, but the downside is that overtime we can develop the preconception that only those who have more can be a blessing to others. We can overlook the potential contribution and blessings those on the outside can provide.

Ruth, as a Moabite woman, was the last person one would think of as a potential hero in this story, a foreigner AND a woman. Both identities lacked value in that culture, yet the writer goes to great length to stress both of those parts of her identity repeatedly throughout the story. In a patriarchal culture that places great emphasis on ethnic identity, Ruth is very much the exception to the rule. Yet she becomes the great-grandmother of King David and is vital in establishing the Davidic line of kings. She is even one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew, women whose bold action greatly impacted the history and success of the Jewish nation. She, like Rahab the prostitute, who incidentally was the mother of Boaz, was a foreign woman whose chesed had great impact on the lives and futures of generations of people.

When we look for blessings that impact our lives and culture, do we look through the same lens? Do we only consider those who are like us, those who traditionally have had the status and means of influence, or are we willing to see the validity and the contributions of the outsider and stranger in our midst?

Some time ago, a small east coast community was struggling financially, so they called an open town meeting to discuss the problem. A couple dozen people were there, including a stranger that no one seemed to know. Most assumed he was a tourist who had just dropped in on the meeting. He started to make a

comment when various ideas were offered, but he was interrupted, so he just kept quiet for the rest of the meeting and ended up leaving early. Just as the stranger left, a late arriving resident came in and asked with excitement, "What was HE doing here? Is he going to help us?"

The others said, "Who are you talking about? Who was that man?"

The latecomer replied, "You mean you don't know? That was John D. Rockefeller. His yacht is in our harbor. Didn't you get his help?"

Now, John D. Rockefeller happened to be one of the richest men in the world at the time. So someone cried out in despair, "No, we didn't get his help, because we didn't know who he was."

Not recognizing those strangers among us and their intrinsic value can be ignoring the blessings of their chesed through our own ignorance. Our news cycle right now is focused on this divide in our own culture. We hear over and over again about the value of people who fit into the mold of what we consider to be "us" versus the lack of worth of those who are different, those we define as "them." Yet if Ruth has anything to teach us, it's exactly the tremendous worth and blessing of "them." The foreigner who lives among us and the ones who come up last, not first.

The final lesson today from Ruth is that often God's chesed is shown through the actions of those we least expect. God is in the background through most of Ruth, acting through the characters in the story. As we seek God's blessings in our own lives, let us always remember that those around us we least expect,

those who are least like us, may be the very ones with to provide that which we seek and need most. Amen.