

Nov. 15, 2009  
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:9-21  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## Blessing

This is our final sermon in a series on the book of Ruth, a story about two women – a Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi, and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. For the last two weeks we have been following these two women who found themselves making it alone in the world after the deaths of their husbands.

Names have particular significance in this story. The name Naomi means ‘pleasantness’ and Ruth’s name means ‘friend.’ The meaning of Ruth’s name, ‘friend,’ fits with her famous words we heard at the beginning of the story,

*Where you go I will go,  
Your people will be my people.*

In that same reading we also encountered the irony in the meaning of Naomi’s name. In her grief she knew no pleasantness. Upon returning to her hometown of Bethlehem, she tells people not to call her Naomi, but instead to call her Mara, which means ‘bitter.’

After church last Sunday one of you said to me, “I cried all through the first sermon about Ruth, and this second part of the story is heavy, is it going to get more upbeat?” Indeed, as you heard, it ends very upbeat with the birth of a baby, who is a blessing to everyone. But we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves. Along the way to the arrival of that baby, the story certainly gets interesting. How did that baby get here? Well, the story is less Victorian than what we are used to in church.

Someone in the extended family should have been following the levirate marriage practice. This custom said the man who is next-of-kin of the deceased husband of a widowed woman with no sons, such as Ruth, should take her as his wife and provide children for the next generation. But that wasn’t happening. The men in the extended family were slow to act.

So Naomi stirs from her bitterness and begins to catch glimpses of “getting a life” - of a different future for Ruth and herself. She takes matters into her own hands and develops a plan to force the issue. She has her eyes set on Boaz, even though he is a more distant kinsman. Boaz has already expressed compassion towards Ruth and been protective of her. Naomi perceives possibilities and seizes the moment. She sends Ruth to the threshing floor in the dark of night, when Boaz’ defenses are down.

The verses that tell of this encounter are not included in the lectionary readings from Ruth. Let’s just say those who want abstinence only sex education should probably not let their children be reading the book of Ruth. Chapter three in Ruth is earthy, as Jewish story telling often is. These verses are very suggestive about sexual matters. However, we miss some of the innuendo because they used different lingo than we do. For

instance the line to “uncover his feet.” Well, feet could mean feet, but it was also a euphemism for part of a man’s anatomy generally kept very private. Twenty first century people might also not realize that generally the women who were found on the threshing room floor were literally “women of the night.” In today’s lingo we might say Naomi told Ruth to go sleep with Boaz. Now exactly what does she mean by that? The details are left to our imaginations. Quite a story! There are moral and ethical matters worth pondering about the behavior of both the men and the women in this extended family. I’ll leave that for your further consideration.

Boaz rises the next morning determined to settle the issue of Ruth and Naomi’s welfare. He goes to the city gate, effectively convening a judicial proceeding. The next-of-kin is there along with elders of the city. After considerable discussion, the decision is reached that Boaz will purchase the land that belongs to Naomi and will take Ruth as his wife.

Which brings us to the good news ending of this story. Boaz does take Ruth as his wife and they have a son.

This is a blessing not only to Ruth and Boaz, but also to Naomi. The story ends with the women of the village offering Naomi words of celebration on the arrival of this grandson. This child of the next generation brings joy and hope to all their hearts.

Just this morning as I was picking up the paper at the store, I observed two gentlemen ahead of me in the check out line. They were admiring the photograph of a young girl, who was one of the man’s great-granddaughters. His face was beaming, and he was chuckling with great delight on this blessing in his life. It was infectious.

Naomi’s joy was infectious. She has let go of her Mara, ‘bitter’ identity and returned to her original name, Naomi, meaning ‘pleasantness.’

In Naomi’s day, the Jewish focus on life after death was not individual, but familial. One experienced eternal life through one’s children, grandchildren, great grandchildren and so on.

Grandparents - who are not caught up as much in the responsibilities and the physical exhaustion of having children - are often the ones dancing in delight in those first days and weeks after the birth. It is fun for me to watch many of you as you share photos and stories about these grand little ones, “fresh” from God, who are a blessing not only to you, but are a gift to life itself.

The experience of giving birth is a profound one. For me it gave new meaning to the passage in Romans which says, “The whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our whole selves.” (8:22-23) I found childbirth to be a profound spiritual, as well as physical, experience - an experience of being intimately and intricately involved in the creative and creating process of God’s Being. “It is in You, O God, that we live and move and have our being.”

As we find ourselves moving into each older generation, we are often more aware of those who have gone before us, and those who will come after we are gone. We realize we live in a long line of people, each a mixture of saint and sinner, who have kept the faith, prayed for the world, and sought to pass on life and love to the next generation. Children are a great blessing. One 4<sup>th</sup> century Celtic theologian taught that each “newborn, freshly come forth from God, contains the original, unsullied goodness of creation and humanity’s essential blessedness.” (*Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, J. Philip Newell, pg. 14) In other words, in a new baby, we see the face of God. Maybe that’s why we so instinctively smile and our hearts warm.

That child who is fresh from God is still within each of us. Hearing Ruth and Naomi’s story may be heart wrenching for those who desire children and have been unable to have them. It may also be unfamiliar to those who have decided not to have children. As we gather together, we come with a wide diversity of experiences when it comes to having children. However, we all share the experience of having been born ourselves, although thankfully we don’t have a conscious memory of the experience. Each of us was a blessing when we were born. We might not have been planned, or expected, and in some painful instances we might have been even undesired by our biological parents, but each of us was still a blessing – a blessing from God. A child of blessing, child of promise.

The story of Ruth ends with a child of promise. Ruth and Boaz’ son was Obed, which means ‘worshipper.’ He was the father of Jesse, which means ‘gift,’ who was the father of David, whose name means, ‘beloved.’ This story ends with a sign of promise and a powerful message of inclusiveness. The great king David comes from a line of people, which includes Jew and Moabite, insider and ‘other.’ When you study the family tree more extensively, you realize there is a mixture of saint and sinner, often in the same person, as is true of David himself. As we approach Advent this family tree has great significance for the Christian story, for it is through this line that the genealogy of Jesus is traced.

*For unto you is born this day  
in the city of David,  
a savior who is Christ the Lord.*

When we are baptized we join this family of faith. I am in the process of visiting with several families who have elementary age children who have not been baptized. We are going to have a special celebration of baptism on January 10 in which these children and a couple of adults are going to be baptized.

One of the questions parents often ask me is about godparents. I tell them that if they wish to have godparents that we welcome them to be part of the celebration. However, one of the functions of godparents is for traditions where baptism happens outside of the worship service. Then the godparents stand in for the whole church. We celebrate baptism in worship so that the whole church makes the baptismal promises with the family. Therefore, for us, the whole congregation functions as godparents.

In the celebration of baptism we acknowledge the name given to the child by the parents. We give witness to God’s love for the child. We bless the child in the name and new life

of Jesus. We also promise to live with them in the Way of Jesus so that they may “live as one who bears Christ’s name.” In other words, we claim each child as our own in faith. We promise to be to them as godparents, grand godparents, and great grand godparents sharing with them in the Body of Christ. In this sacrament we say together, “Blessed be God, who has given us this blessing.”