

Matthew 7:7-8; Ruth 3:1-18
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost; July 29, 2018
Caroline M. Kelly

Halfway through the book of Ruth, we come to this Cinderella-like episode in the story. Ruth has been dutifully caring for her mother-in-law without complaint, laboring in the fields from dawn to dusk, with no expectation of anything in return. Meanwhile, Naomi remains passive, having resigned herself to being a victim, with no hope of rescue.

Her attitude changes when Ruth reports her meeting with Boaz and how he has showered her with kindness and generosity. Responding as if Boaz has invited all the eligible maidens in Bethlehem to a ball, Naomi transforms herself and moves into action. Assuming the role of a fairy godmother, she swoops in to give Ruth a makeover and send her off to the ball to woo the prince.

“My dear daughter, isn’t it about time I arranged a good home for you so you can have a happy life?”¹

Ruth has an advantage over Cinderella, not because of her striking beauty but, because the handsome prince Boaz is a relative of her mother-in-law. Naomi prays that, under the right circumstances, Boaz might be persuaded to marry Ruth.

So, she sends her down to the place where Boaz is processing grain. After Boaz eats and drinks and lies down to sleep, Ruth is instructed to lie down at his feet and wait for him to tell her what to do.

Ruth promises to do what Naomi asks, but when Boaz wakes up and discovers her lying beside him, she decides to take matters into her own hands. “Spread your cloak over me, she asks, for you are next of kin.” In ancient Israel, that’s code for “marry me.” As part of the wedding ceremony, the man would put his coat over the woman as a sign of his promise to protect her.

Boaz hardly needs persuading. But as a man of great integrity, he tells her there is another man who is a closer relation than he. Boaz defers to the other man, promising to make good on Ruth’s proposal if other relative does not. Thought her future is not yet certain, it appears that Cinderella will get her prince one way or the other. And they will all live happily ever after.

But that’s not the way most of our lives go. We don’t have fairy godmothers who can turn pumpkins into golden carriages, mice into horses, rats into coachmen and lizards into footmen, all with a wave of the wand and a “bibbidi, bobbodi boo!”

¹ Eugene Peterson, Ruth 3:1 from *The Message*

We don't have someone to swoop into our lives to fix things. Our parents do their best when we are young but, ultimately, we are called to put ourselves out there, to take that first step, to risk failure and pray that God will walk with us, wherever we are called to go.

The mover and shaker in our lives is God, and God is no fairy godmother. Unspoken and unseen in this story; nevertheless, God is working through the faithfulness of these ordinary people.

There are obstacles and setbacks along the way, but the characters continue to step out and move forward, as if to say, "Okay, God." I don't know what you are up to, and I'm not sure where I am going, but I'm counting on you to use my life in pursuit of something bigger than I am.

And as it happens, God is looking out for them.

When Ruth ventures out to the field to collect grain, she encounters Boaz whose praises her faithfulness to her mother-in-law, saying, "May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD." It turns out that Boaz, himself, will be the vehicle for God's blessing of Ruth.

When Ruth tells Naomi how Boaz treated her with kindness when she went to glean in his fields, Naomi credits God. "Blessed be the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead."

And when Boaz and Ruth meet on the threshing floor, Boaz affirms Ruth's continued faithfulness to Naomi, saying, "May you be blessed by the LORD." If the pattern continues, Boaz will once again be a vessel for God's faithfulness to Ruth.

Boaz is no prince, but a man of integrity and faith whose faithfulness to Ruth is matched only by her faithfulness to Naomi. Boaz knows Ruth could have a younger, more appealing man for her husband. But instead, she devotes herself to Naomi's well-being by providing food and foregoing her own choice of a husband for Boaz, whom she knows can provide the long-term security that Naomi needs.

God wants to work in our lives, too, and like Ruth and Boaz – to make us instruments of God's blessing for others. We know God can use us, because God works through the most unlikely of characters in today's story – even a marginalized, foreign widow.

Yesterday, I made my monthly visit to the federal prison here in Cumberland, where I visit two prisoners. One of them has talked openly with me about his struggle with addiction, his multiple felonies and his time in and out of prison. After almost 10 years, he is set to be released sometime next year, and you can just see the wheels turning as he talks about transitioning to a new life on the outside.

He accepts responsibility for his past and talks about how much he's learned and grown during his time in prison. And, oh, the plans he is making – the jobs, the start-up business, the music he will write and stories he will tell, and how he's going to make it big this time.

He wants to provide for his wife and son. But lately, he's also started talking about building a community center for kids. He wants them to have a place to get off the streets, where they can learn from the mistakes he's made. He wants them to have a chance for a different kind of life. As imperfect as he knows himself to be, he hopes God can use him as an instrument to bless others.

Earlier this morning, Beau Hartman was received into the membership of our congregation. Most of us take for granted the courage it takes to commit oneself to love and follow Jesus. To associate ourselves with an institution whose reputation for hypocrisy often overshadows its commitment to peace and justice is, indeed, an act of faith. It means stepping out despite that history of brokenness and trusting that God can use us as vehicles to help others know the blessings of God.

Gail Foster, too, as she prepares to move to Pittsburgh, is venturing into uncharted waters, stepping out in faith, trusting that God can use her in the new community she will call home.

That is also where we leave off with the story for today – with promises made but not yet fulfilled. We, the spiritual descendants of Ruth, walk by faith in the wake of promises made, but not yet kept. And we may stumble and we may fall.

When you fall, remember that you are baptized, claimed and loved by God. When you fall, it is not a fall back into nothingness, but into the everlasting arms² of a God who is trustworthy, a God who is gracious and merciful, a God who will never let you go.

Thanks be to God!

² Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2003), 110.