

Sermon – “Unexpected Blessings”

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17, Mark 12:38-44

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Our first scripture reading, Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17, reveals the character of the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, two widows to whom we were introduced last Sunday. As they forge a new life together in Bethlehem following the death of their husbands, we find ourselves privy to a pivotal conversation between them and the marriage and son that grow out of their plans and intentionality. Because widows had no livelihood in this patriarchal culture, the book of Leviticus created a law that the nearest male relative of the deceased marry the widow and provide her a future. This is the law Naomi is appealing to when she encourages Ruth to visit Boaz at the threshing floor. Earlier in the story, we see another ancient law working to protect the poor in the community. Extra grain at the time of harvest was to be left behind for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Ruth gleanes the wheat from the fields of Boaz who is a distant kinsman on Naomi's late husband's side. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God's word.

1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." 5 Ruth said to Naomi, "All that you tell me I will do." And continuing the story in chapter four:

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may this child's name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Amen.

Jesus introduces us to another widow in our second scripture reading, Mark 12:38-44. She arrives at the temple giving her last two coins following Jesus' criticism of the religious leaders who exploit the poor, in particular widows. In this final public scene of Jesus' ministry, the widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about to do. Jesus is on his way to Golgotha where he will give "the whole of his life." Jesus calls the church to whole-hearted, self-giving that transcends dollars and cents. Hear now God's holy word.

38 As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." 41 Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are

worth a penny. **43** Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. **44** For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Amen.

The title of the sermon: Unexpected Blessings

The text: "Naomi her mother-in-law said to Ruth, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.'" Ruth 3:1

Let us pray: Holy God of loving kindness, thank you for the advocates along the way who empower us to take necessary risks that lead to unexpected blessings. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Monday my mother died, she and I spent some time together that morning as I wrote a few checks and addressed envelopes for her. On more than one occasion, my mother and I recalled together how my unplanned birth was an unexpected blessing for her and likewise how her presence in our home these last years was an unexpected blessing for me, as she became the daughter I never had.

Katie Couric was on "The View" that morning discussing her new book and the challenges she faced as a rising young woman journalist seeking equality in a man's world. We both listened knowingly. I paused to give thanks for a mother who empowered and advocated for her daughters and the unexpected blessings of wisdom passed from one generation of women to the next.

"The Rising Up of the Springdale Ladies Aid Society" is the name of a play outlining such unexpected blessings skillfully written by our own Carole Kennerly. Westminster will present this play in the Spring of 2022, directed by Kelly Robertson. The opening scene is a grandmother sharing her grandmother's story with her granddaughter. It is an account of generations of courageous women seeking equality for their daughters and granddaughters and the risks they took in the struggle to secure a woman's right to vote.

In 2015 following the presentation of this play at the Hoagland, I was honored to be a part of a panel led by our own Dr. Naomi Lynn, the first Hispanic, woman president of an American Public University, UIS here in Springfield. Coincidentally, Naomi and her sister Ruth are named for these strong biblical role models. Naomi shared a quote by Thomas Jefferson during the discussion as she affirmed the role of her husband, the late Dr. Robert Lynn, on their academic and professional journeys and other male mentors along the way who encouraged and welcomed her leadership. She said: *Men of quality are not threatened by women of equality.*

One cannot help but wonder if the biblical Naomi sensed that Boaz was a man of quality when she advised her daughter-in-law to lay at his feet on the threshing floor. Make no mistake, my friends, this was a bold and risky move which could have ended badly. Without getting into the details or the politics of sexuality in ancient Israel, Ruth was making it very clear to Boaz that she was interested in becoming his wife.

On one level, the Book of Ruth is a simple story of genealogy with the surprise ending and unexpected blessing of a foreign woman, a Moabite, becoming the great-grandmother of King David and foremother to the Christ Child in a lineage which emphasized purity of race.

On another level, the Book of Ruth is a story of resilience, loyalty and loving-kindness between two women following the untimely and unfortunate death of their husbands. Together they make a way where there is no way. Naomi knows the system and they strategically work the system to secure a future. There is risk and respect among all the players in this delightful, fortuitous scenario. They give their all to one another, not unlike the widow in Mark's story who gives her all. Something we are each called to do in the lives we live, in the commitments we make, and in the unexpected blessing along the way. We are a little further down the road of justice and equality only because of the wisdom and risks of those who have walked before us...because of what they did for love.

One of our Presbyterian Women's circle Ruth and Naomi was named for this inter-generational friendship. The book *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life*, by Joan Chittister, begins the chapter on Empowerment with these words:

The moment a woman becomes conscious of the way her world goes together, she is obligated to say her truth for the sake of all the women yet unborn. Then, because of her, their own lives may be better than hers was...Naomi is a woman who knows how life works, and, powerless as she is in the system, she has great strength of self, great consciousness of her dignity as a daughter of God. She knows herself to have a place in God's order of things. And she passes on to Ruth the kind of consciousness it takes to move the system closer to its own integrity, if only one step at a time.

Today we give thanks for this story of risk, courage, commitment, and unexpected blessings. As we honor loved ones who have gone before us this past year, we give thanks for what they did for love, for the dignity with which they lived, for the wisdom and strength passed on along the way, and for the unexpected blessings of their lives. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we continue the journey, one step at a time, to find a greater equality, kindness, and justice for all. Amen.