

21 November 2021 Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Muskegon, MI
Tom Wagner, “Ruth: A Harvest Time Comedy” Ruth 3:1-5

Nights grow longer. Winds blow colder. Once brilliant foliage molders on the forest floor. While autumn continues for another month, **harvest** is largely complete. Now comes time to gather, celebrate and share the bounty in a spirit of gratitude.

The Old Testament **Book of Ruth**, from which I read a brief passage, is a short story set during grain harvest. It feels like a good fit with our harvest time even in northern latitudes. In the **Hebrew Bible** or **TANAKH**, Ruth appears among the final books collectively called **the Writings**, grouped as one of the **five scrolls** read during various Jewish holidays. The Book of Ruth was later placed **between Judges and I Samuel** in the Greek translation known as the **Septuagint**, a pattern followed by later Christian translations. The change likely was due to the genealogical note at the end of the story concerning King David. The Jewish community traditionally reads the story during **Shavuot**, also known as the Feast of Weeks. Originally, it celebrated the end of the **barley harvest**, reckoned 50 days or 7 weeks after Passover. Many of us know the holiday better by its later Greek name **Pentecost** (πεντηκστής). Largely due to the role of Passover in the Passion narratives, the Christian liturgical calendar places Pentecost 50 days after Easter. I mention these traditions simply to note that this was a **mid-spring** harvest, rather than fall. That original seasonal setting may contribute to the growing optimism of the plot.

When I characterize Ruth as a **comedy**, I am thinking in the sense of **classical literature or drama**. The label simply indicates a story with a **happy ending**, rather than one that invokes laughter as in contemporary use. However, I do confess I can imagine Lucile Ball instructing Ruth on how to woo Boaz, or Rock Hudson discovering Doris Day next to him on the threshing floor. That said, the story that I plan to summarize is one that moves **from tragic circumstances, but ends with a hopeful future**. The story contains **no miracles or theophanies**. While there is a strong sense of God’s presence throughout the book, the **actions of human characters, particularly the women**, move the plot along. It is a story of honest piety, passionate loyalty and sincere kindness.

Chapter 1 begins with a description of how **Naomi** with her husband and two sons had fled a famine in their homeland, moving to Moab. After her husband died, her sons marry local women, but 10 years later, the sons have also died without children. Having heard that YHWH had ended the famine in Judah, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem, initially joined by her sons’ widowed wives, **Orpah** and **Ruth**. It speaks well of the women’s **relationship** that the daughters-in-law chose to follow their mother-in-law away from their home country. Naomi’s feelings for Orpah and Ruth appear to be mutual, because as she urges them to return home, she blesses both women praying that YHWH will **deal kindly** with them, as they have dealt with her and her family. In response to their first refusal, Naomi points out that she has nothing to offer her daughters-in-law. Her **despair** is more than mourning for her loved ones. In a highly **patriarchal society**, the loss of the family’s men folk endangered the lives of the surviving women. Having no grandchildren, she saw no future. It has become a crisis of faith for her, believing YHWH has turned against her. After a final session of weeping together, Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and takes her advice to go home. However, **Ruth** clings to Naomi, pledging **undying commitment** to her and her God. Many of you are likely familiar with Ruth’s pledge of loyalty to her mother-in-law, portions of which are often recited in wedding ceremonies:

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
There I will be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if death parts me from you.” (Vv. 16-17 NRSV)

Naomi noting the younger woman’s determination ceases to dissuade her from continuing the journey.

.An observation made by commentators is that there are **no villains** in the story. It is clear that Orpah struggled mightily with the decision to turn back home. It is a mistake to judge her harshly, especially after Naomi’s emphatic plea. Ruth may have been simply more perceptive, recognizing the **depth of Naomi’s depression**. Presently helping her mother-in-law is a higher priority than finding a new husband. Her commitment to Naomi including to die and be buried where Naomi will die and be buried was a real possibility considering their circumstances. The commitment includes the promise that **“your God” will be “my God”**. Regardless of her current emotional state, Naomi has been an **example of faith** to Ruth. Perhaps due to Naomi’s misfortunes, Ruth has chosen to worship the **God of the oppressed**.

The two widows arrive in Bethlehem greeted by a chorus of the **village women** asking, “Is this Naomi?” Here Naomi responds with a **word play** indicating the depth of her despair. Her given name Naomi means “pleasant”. However, she asks her neighbors to call her **Mara** meaning **bitter**, claiming that God has dealt bitterly with her. **Hopelessness has become part of her identity**.

Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem at the **beginning of the barley harvest**. The action in **Chapter 2** now turns to the barley fields. Ruth asks Naomi’s permission to glean behind the reapers, which is given. The practice of **gleaning** in the Law of Moses was a way of sharing God’s bounty with the most vulnerable members of society--especially **orphans, widows and foreigners** (Lev. 19:9-10 and Deut. 24:19-22). Ruth ends up gleaning in a field belonging to **Boaz**, a relative of Naomi’s late husband. When Boaz arrives at the field Ruth catches his eye and he asks the foreman of his reapers about her. The **foreman reports** that she is Naomi’s Moabite daughter-in-law, who asked permission to glean and has been working unceasingly since early morning. Next **Boaz speaks directly to Ruth** instructing her to remain in his field and work beside his own young women. He assures her that he has ordered his young men not to bother her and she is granted the privilege of drinking water provided to the other workers. Ruth is grateful, but curious why Boaz would show such **kindness to a foreigner**. Boaz responds that he is aware of the **sacrifices she has made on behalf of her mother-in-law** and **prays that YHWH will reward her for her deeds**. Boaz also invites her to eat with his other workers at mealtime. Later he instructs the workers not only to allow Ruth to glean among the bundled sheaves of grain, but to pull out handfuls of stalks giving her additional grain. When Ruth returned to Naomi **that evening**, the older woman is impressed with how much the younger woman had gleaned. Moreover, Ruth brought back leftovers from the noon meal. When Naomi learns that it was in Boaz’ field that Ruth had gleaned **she begins to recover some hope**. She calls for YHWH’s blessing on one “whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.” She also tells Ruth that **Boaz is a close kinsman**. Ruth reports that Boaz has suggested that she **continue to glean in his fields** until the end of the harvest. Naomi agrees that this would be wise. So, Ruth continues to work in his fields until the end of both the barley and wheat harvests. Ruth and Naomi have found a means of survival by the end of Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 opens with Naomi sufficiently recovered from her depression to **advise Ruth on how to propose marriage to Boaz**. Note that her concern is security for Ruth’s future. Naomi’s plan for Ruth was based on the custom that a **next-of-kin** should act as a **redeemer**, (Hebrew *goel*) buying relatives out of debt slavery, buying back land sold out of the family to pay a debt, and even marry the widow of a dead brother to carry on the dead man’s family line. While Boaz was not a brother of Ruth’s first husband, Naomi appears to have counted on his respect for Ruth to help stretch the concept a bit. Knowing that Boaz will sleep on the threshing floor that night to guard his winnowed grain, Naomi instructs Ruth to wash and put on her best dress before stealthily going down to the threshing floor. After Boaz falls asleep, she is to **uncover his feet and lie down**. Later Boaz was startled to find a woman sleeping at his feet. The text handles the sensuality of this encounter with great delicacy. I suspect that a modern retelling as a romantic comedy would over emphasize this scene.

Ruth identifies herself and challenges Boaz as next-of-kin to marry her, to spread his cloak over her. Boaz is happy to oblige, but notes there is **another kinsman** more closely related. If he is unwilling to act as redeemer, Boaz will. He invites Ruth to remain for the night and sends her home before daylight with a cloak full of grain to share with her mother-in-law.

As **Chapter 4** begins, Boaz meets with the unnamed next-of-kin at **the village gate** with 10 elders. The elders as influential members of the community often held court at the gate to settle disputes, witness contracts or interpret local laws and customs. Boaz reports that Naomi has land available for redemption if the next-of-kin is interested. He is, until he learns that **redeeming the property includes marrying Ruth**. The complication for him is that since Ruth is still of child bearing age, any son she might bear would be considered the heir to Ruth's dead husband. Not wanting to damage his own inheritance, the next-of-kin tells Boaz to take the right of redemption for himself. Boaz takes on the responsibility, with the elders as witnesses. Boaz and Ruth marry and have a son. The chorus of village women tell Naomi how blessed she is to have a next-of-kin who has restored her life, a daughter-in-law who loves her and worth more than seven sons. Curiously, the child is named by the village women and counted as Naomi's son.

As a college student, I first heard a **demographer** suggest that the **nuclear family** as we came to know it in the mid-20th Century was a historical anomaly. Her thesis was a response to family values rhetoric common in the late 1970s. She based her assertion on **lower life expectancies of past centuries**. "Until death do us part" came early to many couples, and parents often didn't live to see their offspring reach maturity. Hence, multiple marriages and step relationships were common in the past. I'm aware of such cases among my 18th and 19th century ancestors. Yet this demographer **failed to note that traditional structures of extended families** were often in place to give stability to smaller units in crisis. On the other hand, the "family values" crowd **often fails to understand that the social and economic forces, which have so scattered and isolated us**, were at work long before women began punching timecards. The consumer economic dreams of 1950s suburban family life, which too many people pine for, created much of the economic, environmental and social brokenness of our time. We may have to look to the **pre-industrial** past for lifestyle models, which gave men, women, older children and active elders meaningful roles in household economics. A multi-generational, extended family approach could provide **parental support, child rearing, elder care and mentoring of youth**. One important change is that men have to share the decision making process more equitably than in the past. Of the tasks I mentioned above, child rearing remains a key task for families, in spite of our diminished structures. **Whether parents are single or coupled, they rarely raise children successfully on their own. It requires a broader community effort.**

Perhaps we are now **too scattered to rebuild traditional extended family structures**. However, we all need a sense of belonging to something larger than ourselves. Developing **new cooperative relationships** requires greater intentionality than did old extended family patterns. I've been thinking about **the collective relationship of the early church following Pentecost** (see Acts 2:44 & 4:32). While some scholars dismiss the phase as either a failed social experiment or an interim arrangement before a quickly approaching apocalypse, it seems more likely that this new relationship was rooted in deeply held cultural patterns. **Extended family households were the norm among ancient Mediterranean peoples**. Many of those who joined the early church found themselves cut off from past relationships. **The church became their family**. Living in community resulted both from their **deeply held love** for each other and **economic necessity**. While community of goods is rare in my tradition, **mutual aid** remains a part of our ethos.

At home we have an inside joke, repeating as early as July that "**winter is coming**". It is something we began saying long before we ever saw *Game of Thrones*. As I gather firewood and Lois tends garden there is a sense of urgency until the woodshed is full and the garden put to rest. The end of harvest arrives with both a sense of gratitude, but also some foreboding, as the sky turns grey and the landscape prepares for its winter slumber. Yet it is a time of rest—especially taking time to read by the fire without feeling guilty. However, though the story of Ruth with its springtime harvest begins in deep despair, it ends with no trace of clouds on the horizon.

It is a story that moves from **scarcity to abundance**, from **isolation to community** and from **despair to hope**. Indeed, it moves from **death to life**, particularly for Naomi. There is a future. Ruth, an outsider, **chooses to join a new community** and the community quickly accepts her. A family is restored. While there is a strong sense of the divine in their midst, the ingenuity of **two women** drive the action of the tale. A screen or stage writer possibly could turn the tale into a romantic comedy, but I am thankful for its original classic comedy form.

NOTES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Ruth

Gottwald, Norman K., *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985)

JPS Hebrew-English TANAKH, second edition, (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999)

Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female*, (NY: Crossroad, 1993)

Smith, Louise Pettibone and Cleland, James T., "The Book of Ruth", *The Interpreter's Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1953)