

Daring to be Vulnerable©

Ruth 3:1-18

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What is something you have done in your life that made you feel very vulnerable? Something that you knew was risky, that could go really well, or that could make you look very foolish, at the least – and really bad, at the worst?

It takes a lot of nerve to allow ourselves to be vulnerable to someone, doesn't it? None of us like opening ourselves for others to see the self that we try to protect, that we guard so it doesn't get hurt, or embarrassed, or feel ashamed. Being vulnerable can feel a bit like standing naked in front of a crowd. We like to cover up most of ourselves.

It can hurt when what we do goes wrong – a different result than what we intended with someone. Sometimes, if our ego is fragile, it can be devastating.

Well, I can't help but think that Ruth must have gone on this mission, that her mother-in-law sent her, on with some fear and trepidation. She was a foreigner, as was made clear in the past two chapters. But she was accepted and treated with great kindness by the landowner, Boaz.

Boaz – a pillar of the community – was an older man. We don't know how much older, but that is hinted at because he calls her *daughter*. He is impressed with Ruth's commitment and loyalty to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. He knows they are poverty stricken and he admires Ruth's dedication to working hard to provide for herself and Naomi.

Boaz takes Ruth under his wing, so to speak, making sure she is protected and that there is plenty of grain and sheaves for her to glean.

When Naomi hears that it is Boaz who has shown kindness to Ruth, she then remembers that he is a close relative to her deceased husband. In her deep grief and despair, it seems that she had forgotten there was anyone left. She knew there were no sons – Ruth's husband and the other son both had died.

There was no one, so she thought, who could fulfill the Levite law of taking care of a dead man's widow and family.

Ruth was young enough that she probably could have a chance of marrying again, especially if she had stayed in Moab, her homeland. But she chose to follow Naomi to Bethlehem – chose to be her close helper. This in itself seemed to impress Boaz. Ruth's integrity and kindness was beyond question.

So, Naomi begins to form a plan, now that she knows who Boaz is. She tells Ruth to make herself look and smell nice and to go to Boaz in the night. She dares to tell Ruth – this young woman – to lay beside Boaz and wait for him to tell her what to do.
WHAT???

It's a little scandalous for us today. It's very manipulative as well, don't you think? I mean, it's difficult to imagine telling any of the young women in my family to go to a man at night and lay down beside him, to uncover him, and wait to see what he says to do. Nope, that won't be happening.

Can't you imagine how scared Ruth must have felt to carry this plan out? She was making herself very vulnerable indeed. She didn't know what would happen, what Boaz would do – or think of her.

If nothing else, Boaz could order her to get away from him and to never come back to glean in his fields again. He could have called her every name in the book and spread it all over the town.

It could have ended very badly for Ruth – and ultimately, for Naomi as well.

But Ruth dared to be vulnerable. She was obedient to following her mother-in-law's order, trusting that Naomi knew what was the right thing and trusting that Boaz truly was the kind man she had found him to be in the fields.

It's important for us to understand how different things were in that day. There was not much a woman could do without a man taking care of her. She had little choice and little say about anything. And the law was that the next of kin should take care of his relatives' family if he died.

Ruth made herself vulnerable, trusting that Boaz would show the integrity and respect for her, and for the law, as Naomi had planned.

So, she went. She went at night, and after he was finished threshing the barley; after he had eaten and drank, after he fell asleep, she then quietly went to him, uncovered him and lay down.

About midnight, he turned over and woke up, realizing there was a woman lying there! He was quite startled.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I am Ruth, your servant,” she answered.

And then she said, “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.”

Now just so you know, that phrase “spread your cloak” actually, in Hebrew, means *to marry*. Ruth was actually proposing to Boaz.

“Marry me, because I am your next of kin and it's lawful to do so.” She could have said,

“It's your responsibility to marry me and take care of Naomi and me, because it's the law.” But she was not that brash, or that bold.

This had to be the moment where Ruth's heart kind of stopped beating until Boaz responded. She had made herself very vulnerable to him and at this point it could end up really great, or terribly bad.

But Boaz was truly a man of integrity and kindness and respect. And he praised Ruth for what she had done.

He said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman."

Whew! Big sigh of relief there. I wonder how Ruth felt, though, when the next thing he said was that there was another man who was a closer relative than he. And Boaz needed to see if that man was willing to take her as his wife. If not, then Boaz assured her that he would. And then he told her to lie down and sleep until morning and then she would leave before anyone saw her there.

I'm thinking Ruth might have been a little nervous once again, thinking she may have to marry a complete stranger. Boaz was someone she knew to be kind and gracious and caring. She knew nothing about this other man. But she was willing to do what she had to do, out of loyalty and love for Naomi.

In the morning, she got up very early and Boaz gave her some barley to take home. He promised that he would take care of talking to the other man that very day and that she would know later on.

When she arrived home, Naomi was waiting to hear how it went. Ruth gave her the barley and told her the whole conversation. And Naomi told her to wait patiently, for Boaz would keep his word.

Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi is matched by Boaz's faithfulness to Ruth. They both are examples of the faithful love of God. A faithfulness that is shown to all of God's people – especially through God's own Son, Jesus.

Boaz is impressed that Ruth – a young woman – would be so loyal to Naomi that she would honor the law and come to Boaz, an older man who was a close relative, rather than choosing a young man.

Next week will be the last of the sermon series on Ruth. We will hear how Boaz goes to the other, closer relative and how he makes a deal with him, in front of witnesses so all would know it was on the up and up.

All's well that ends well, right? This is, as Bob said in the introduction to the first chapter, a love story that has God's providence all over it. There is an old adage that says, "A coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous." And yet, God's hand is in this story, his plan and purpose become so evident as we read the rest of the story.

Daring to be vulnerable can be risky. But if we are open to listening to the Holy Spirit – recognizing when the holy nudge is poking us – we might find that taking that risk opens up a whole new world of good – of blessings that sometimes trickle down over us and others, and sometimes rushes so fast that it almost knocks us down.

But it is all for good; all in God's holy plan. We must be in prayer – as individuals, but also as the Church. We must ask ourselves, and especially God, what the Lord is nudging us to take a risk on – to be vulnerable in; what new and different and daring thing might God be asking us, the Church, to do that seems out of our comfort zone.

What would that look like? Would it be some new mission? A mission trip that takes us to a place of blessing, and discomfort? Could it be supporting people who are at risk themselves?

Speaking out for justice – being the voice of Christ for those who are oppressed? Could it be "doing Church" in a new and different way?

Could it be simply reaching out to people in our own neighborhood and community and finding ways to tell them about God's amazing love and mercy; about what Jesus has done for us all in his death and resurrection?

Do you know that we are in a post-Christian era? Our country is a mission field full of opportunities to share the good news. Isn't that the command of Jesus in the Great Commission? How do we learn to do that?

Will we dare to be vulnerable like Ruth? Will we allow God to lead us in faith, trusting that it will all work out for the good? Blessings will abound because of our faithfulness. Ruth's obedience resulted in great things. Ours will too, if we will dare to step out in faith and be vulnerable as well.

May God lead us and bless us. Amen.

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