

Message
November 7-8, 2009 – Proper 27B
Ruth 1:15-17; 2:3,8; 4:13-17; Mark 12:38-48
Beginning Again
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When our daughter, Emily, learned to drive, she took her driving very seriously. We counted on her to be a responsible driver, to take on certain chores for us while we were at work. She became a very good driver. Then, she had two fender benders and an accident. The accident really wasn't her fault. But, it put a serious bump in the road for her driving career. Her confidence was shattered. Emily eventually stopped driving. For a while, that was fine, because she lived in New York City and then Washington, D.C. and she didn't need to drive. Over time, after Emily was married and her children were born, she came to realize that she was going to have to begin to drive again. So, she studied the booklet from DMV, she took the test again, and she now has her license. Emily's road to driving had some stops and starts. But, she did it.

That's how it is, often when we begin again. Usually, we've suffered some loss, some disappointment; some woundedness; so beginning again, isn't so easy. We probably have some baggage from before; some stuff we have to work through. I imagine we've all been there; at those places where we have to begin again.

That's exactly how it is with our friend Ruth, in the story we hear today with three essential elements for beginning again:

1. commitment (coupled with hard work)
2. redeemers (seeking out people who look for the best in us)
3. celebrating (giving thanks for God's blessing upon our beginning again.)

The family saga of Ruth is just 4 chapters, just 85 verses in total. It's sandwiched and sits in stark contrast between Judges, a book of rebellion and controversy and First Samuel, the call of Israel's first king.

Here's the story in a nutshell. The story begins, "when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land." Unable to make a living in their homeland of Bethlehem, Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion must relocate, across the Jordan River to Moab; the armpit of the eastern region of Judah. Leaving their roots behind, they journey to Moab with the hopes of a better job market. Tragedy strikes when Elimelech, Naomi's husband, dies. Mahlon and Chilion marry, and we learn little of their time in Moab, except that it appears the family doesn't grow, as wives Orpah and Ruth don't bear children. After ten years, once again, heartbreak strikes. Mahlon and Chilion die. The women, grief stricken, are forced to begin again. With all their hearts, the women make risky commitments; jump in with all they've got. Learning that God has restored prosperity to Judah, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem. Out of love and concern, Naomi tells her daughters-in-law, "go back" to their family homes in Moab, where they may well find husbands again and their honor will be restored. Orpah and Ruth protest. In the end Orpah obeys, and returns to her family. But, Ruth disobeying Naomi's directive, makes the commitment to go with Naomi. Speaking some

of the most beautiful words in all of scripture, Ruth pledges her commitment: *wherever you go, I shall go, wherever you live, I shall live. Your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God.*

Easier said than done. Ruth is a Moabite, she's an outsider. She won't fit in with the Bethlehem crowd; mainly because she's not a Jew. Moabites worship a different god; not the one true God. Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem; but, not without some tension on the home front. Naomi, now bitter and homeless and without means, accompanied by this foreign daughter-in-law, isn't fitting in. She's marginalized. The town is astir. She needs a redeemer. In enters, Boaz. Boaz, who holds some considerable wealth, and a high standing in the community, is recognized as Naomi's kinsman on her husband's side. In Hebrew the word kinsman is "go el" (goe – eel) which means, next of kin, or redeemer. Boaz has a Levite, legal responsibility to protect family members. He's not the first in the family obligated to serve as the redeemer. But, he takes an interest in Ruth, who having earnestly jumped into the job market, grateful for work, is giving it all she's got, working hard from dawn to dusk gleaning his fields.

Gleaning is an ancient form of welfare, still employed today, that provides sustenance for the poor and destitute. Land owners instruct their farmers not to harvest the edges of the fields. As the workers move through, tying up bundles of produce, leaving grain stalks behind, those in need, typically the poor, the orphaned and the widowed, as dictated by Judaic Law, may move through and gather what they need. Boaz, takes it upon himself to protect Ruth in her gleaning.

In time, Boaz restores Naomi to the family property. He acquires "everything" including Ruth. It seems that redeemers live with commitment as well. Crossing cultural and ethnic boundaries, Boaz marries Ruth to secure the family name. And what a family name.

The brief story comes to a close, with a new beginning, a new life. We learn that God gifts Boaz and Ruth with a son, named Obed. Obed is the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of king David, the ancestor of our Lord. New beginnings are born for Ruth and Boaz, for Naomi, for the Jews, who will come to celebrate their saving king; and most importantly for us, in Jesus, the great high king who comes to bring new life, love and salvation, abundantly.

Commitment, redeemers and celebration: three essential ingredients to new beginnings.

Ruth jumps in with full force. I wonder if Ruth's commitment to follow is, in fact, a conversion. Her commitment is by no means half baked. Rather, she gives it her all. She's not compromising, agreeing to worship her Moabite god *and* our God. She's pledging her all to the one true God, the one who redeems; the God of salvation; the one who commits all in all to us, through Jesus Christ, bringing promise and hope. And, so it seems that Ruth, too, in her courageous commitment, along with Naomi, and Boaz, all serve as redeemers for this God of ours who mercifully brings us saving grace.

I'm always so grateful for those redeemers in my life, and the lives of my family. Those people who have lovingly reached out to care for us, giving us a chance when we felt least capable of managing. I remember my final months of seminary. It was a crazy time. I was trying to complete classes in both Northern Virginia at VTS and here in Richmond at Union, all the while preparing for ordination and trying to find a job! In the middle of all that our daughter decided to be married. Something had to give. It was the final week of school and I was in exams. Professors posted the exams on line, which thankfully lessened my commuting time. I sat for my final exam in New Testament, taught by the dean. I'd attended every class and was always prepared. But, when it came time to pound out that exam, my brain just wouldn't work. I fumbled through the exam, frustrated at my inability to produce, writing a mediocre paper at best. I sent in the exam embarrassed at my performance and mad at myself for getting so overwhelmed. Not a good way to end three years of seminary. Needless to say, I did poorly on the exam, which I knew would impact my final grade and my graduation. Just days before graduation, I received my results only to learn that my New Testament grade was high; not the highest of my grades; but certainly within the commendable range. On the day of graduation, as we assembled, I saw the dean across the worship space. I went over and gave him a huge hug, and said, thank you. (You don't hug the dean of the seminary). The dean simply offered this, "Hillary, you did the work, and it was fine work."

Redeemers are those people, who buy us back into the family, into the community, when we have fallen out of favor, or collapsed into bondage; those people who help us help ourselves; those who often find us when we're on the edge, during those times when we're marginalized. Redeemers are those people who bring us to our most loving redeemer, Jesus Christ, who gets us on the road to recovery so we may begin again.

Roads that lead to good news and celebration over how God blesses us in all our stories.

Allison is a busy, single mom, with 9 month old Sam, and she's grateful for new beginnings. Allison and Sam live in St. Cloud, Minnesota in a shelter named, New Beginnings. Two years ago, young Allison was roaming the streets, jobless, hopeless, and spiraling into a downward slope of addiction. She stumbled upon New Beginnings. It hasn't been easy. Her first day with New Beginnings was the day Sam was born. Allison's had to learn a lot about parenting skills and how to juggle her demanding schedule. Now, Allison has a job, at Subway, and she works hard. Soon, Allison and Sam will be transitioning out of New Beginnings to live independently. She's learned a lot in her new life, most of all, to take responsibility for her commitment to being the best mother. She's learned to ask for help. She needs those redeemers, those people to lift her up, and rescue her. And, Allison, she celebrates; celebrates that in life, she's restored and made new, through the love of God in Christ.

So, once again, we get behind the wheel, and we begin again. This time, we begin stronger because Jesus equips us. This time, we seek out and partner up because, Jesus is with us. This time, we sing out with alleluias, because Jesus, in his abundant love for us, brings us to rejoicing with his love and mercy. Amen!!

