

Whatever It Takes (Ruth#2)

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Ruth 2:1-7, I Thessalonians 4:11-12

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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Let me invite you to do a little thinking as I begin this morning. Please complete this sentence, to yourselves: “I’d rather die than...”

What reality, what possibility, is so unattractive to you that you’d just as soon shuffle off this mortal coil as to go ahead and follow through on it?

I mean, all of us have preferences, right? I like to eat fish, you prefer a little tofu, and he won’t eat a salad. But if fish, or tofu, or a big old bowl of salad was all that stood between you and starvation, could you choke it down?

I guess what I’m asking is whether there is anything that you consider to be so far “beneath” you, so unattractive, that it is, in fact, impossible for you to even consider.



The film *The Good Lie* tells the story of a group of Sudanese children who are forced to leave their villages and wander through the wilderness in search of refuge. At one point, the youngest child in the group dies as a result of dehydration. When he realizes what has happened, the eldest boy urinates into a metal pot and says, “I want to live. I do not want to die.” He takes a drink, and passes it around to the surviving children, who each repeat that phrase before they sip. It is a powerful, powerful scene, as something that is abjectly horrible (children drinking their own urine) is transformed into something almost sacramental as the group’s leader acts with love and humility to preserve life.



In contrast, there’s an equally moving scene in *Angela’s Ashes* in which a young

Frank McCourt is ridiculed by his father for picking up lumps of coal that have fallen from a wagon. Malachy McCourt is too proud to do that, and so the family's home is cold and damp and several children die as a result of the conditions there.

The first film gives us a glimpse of someone who did the unthinkable in order to survive, while the second demonstrates the ways that human pride or laziness or bitterness can literally kill.



¹Today's reading from the book of Ruth allows us to focus on the character and behavior of Ruth for the first time. Last week, we saw the overwhelming nature of this family's calamity from the perspective of Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law. Her suffering was so great that there were several times when it appeared as though she was pretty much ready to lay down and die – she felt as though the grief was too real, and there was too much for her to do.

At this point, however, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, decides that if the family is going to be saved, it's because she can take action. Here in the beginning of Ruth 2, this woman acts with courage, integrity, and humility. She does what it takes to ensure survival.

As we consider this text, pay attention to how she is known. She's not just "Ruth." She's not "Mahlon's wife" or "Naomi's daughter-in-law." She is "Ruth the Moabite". "Ruth, the Outsider." "Ruth, the One Who Doesn't Belong Here." In the wake of the global movement to demonize refugees and ostracize the foreigner, this is important for us to note this morning. Even while Naomi and at least some in her home village know the sacrifices that Ruth has made and the bravery she's already displayed, they can't resist reminding her and the rest of us that she's really not

¹ *Gleaning*, Arthur Hughes (1832-1915)

that important. She's just a Moabite. She's nobody, at least in the eyes of that culture. They are not sure that she's welcome.



²And yet, as I've mentioned, she has chosen to do what she needs to do in order to stay alive. If Ruth and Naomi are to survive, it'll be because Ruth is willing to become a gleaner.

I would imagine that if many of us were told today that our survival depended on our ability to “glean”, we'd be in trouble, simply because a lot of us aren't exactly sure what that means. “Gleaning” is the act of going through a farmer's fields to collect that portion of the crop that was not taken by the original harvesters. It might be unripe, or overripe, or damaged – but for whatever reason, a “gleaner” is someone who goes into a field from which almost all of the food has been removed in the hopes of finding something that will get her or him through the day. In reality, when you see a homeless person picking through the trash at the fast food restaurant, you're looking at a form of 21st-Century gleaning.

Whether we're talking in Bible times or in our own, gleaning is hard and demeaning work. I don't know whether Ruth thought of herself as a gleaner when she made all those flowery promises to Naomi about sticking together back in chapter 1. But now they're in Bethlehem, and they are hungry. And so for Ruth, there is not much debate about it – she simply announces to her mother-in-law that she's going and she works so hard that she catches the eye of the folks who are getting paid to bring in the crop.

As we consider wisdom of the Book of Ruth for our own day and age, it seems to me that one lesson might be simply that sometimes we have to do what we would prefer not to do in order to get to a future that is a better place than where we are now.

² *Untitled (Ruth and Naomi Gleaning)*, photo by Adi Ness, 2006

Sometimes, we have to do that which we consider to be unappealing or menial or even humiliating if we are going to do our part in growing in faith and life.

Now, before I tell you what I *do* mean, let me emphasize what I *do not* mean by this. I *am not* suggesting that it is ever appropriate for someone with power to somehow bully you or anyone else into doing something that is immoral or unhealthy or destructive just because you may not have any better options. I was once asked by a thirteen-year-old girl if I thought that selling drugs was bad. When I mentioned that I did, she started to cry and said, “Well now I don’t know what to do. My daddy makes me help him put the stuff in little bags and weigh it, and when I told him that I didn’t want to, he said that the Bible said to ‘honor your parents’, so if I want to be a good Christian I have to help him.”

No. I can’t tell you how wrong that is. In the same way, it’s not appropriate to let someone use you – your body, your labor, your self – as a means to help them get to a place that is in opposition to God’s best. That is *not* what I mean when I say sometimes we have to do things that are unpleasant or humiliating.

And similarly, I’m not talking about all those commercials that you’ll be seeing in the months to come about the Olympics, and about what makes a person special is the fact that she or he gets up at three a.m. and runs 37 miles and eats only raw eggs and locusts as he or she pushes towards being the best gymnast/swimmer/sprinter that has ever gone for the gold. There may be some valid lessons in self-discipline and motivation to be had there, but that’s not what I’m talking about here.

What I *am* saying is that a huge part of the Christian life is rooted in doing what you can do to take responsibility for yourself as well as for other people. Lots of times, that will be unpleasant.

Often, it will be difficult. Sometimes, it will even seem unfair. None of those are sufficient reasons not to act.

Sometimes, this kind of action is easy to recognize, but difficult to do. Paying your rent on time, for instance. Just do it. Getting out of bed and going to work or school, even on days when you don't "feel like it". Doing what you need to do in order to keep promises you made to someone, even when somehow that's become inconvenient for you. I don't think that you need me, or Ruth, or Jesus, to tell you that these things are right and good and appropriate ways to behave as a mature person in the world. If this was an internet meme, it would say something like "adulting is hard".

My mother used to encourage me to "be the bigger person". For a long time I hoped that meant eating two sandwiches a day and taking extra dessert, but it turns out that's not what she was talking about. What she meant, of course, was that being in relationship with other people provides us with all kinds of opportunities to swallow our pride and take the risk and try to do what's right, even when we're afraid that it's going to come back to bite us and lead us to more pain.

Years ago, I heard a version of this from a friend, who had gotten it from a friend, who had probably stolen it from someone else. Where it comes from doesn't matter: the point my friend shared with me was this: Dave, you've got to keep your side of the street clean.



What she meant by this was the fact that people will do all sorts of things that are unfair or ill-advised, but that you can't control all that they are doing. You can only be in charge of making sure that there's no way in which you are contributing to the degradation or marginalization of another human being.

Ruth is a strong woman who knows who she is and is willing to go and do some difficult things for all the right reasons. I

wonder if people might be able to say the same thing about me or about you? Have I gotten so tired of being burnt in relationships that I don't extend myself the way that I ought? Are you so frustrated by the ways that nobody at your place of work seems to do anything that you've become a part of the problem, too? When you look at a relationship or a social problem, are you tempted to cry out, "Oh, what's the use? I hate this and nothing is ever going to change anyway..."?

Paul writes to his friends in Thessalonica, and he says that they ought to work hard and be diligent and seek to "be respectable". I'm pretty sure that he's not saying this because there's a great financial or social gain to come from it. I think he's saying it because no matter what your neighbor does, who your pastor is, or what your brother did last week, the bottom line is that if you have the chance to do what's right, you do it. End of story.

But you might object, and say, "look, this 'doing it all like it depends on you' business sounds an awful lot like we are supposed to excuse other people's bad behavior and just get used to being the people who clean up other people's messes. You might think that if people of faith walk around being humble and meek and deferential, that the powers that be will never be challenged and that real change won't occur. I agree – we can't be one-sided in any of this, and there are a lot of things that we need to say about people who have power (and we'll say them next week). The truth this week is that Ruth isn't in charge of, and can't control Boaz, or Naomi, or the other reapers or gleaners. Ruth can only take responsibility for her own actions – which she must do on a daily basis.

As we consider the example of Ruth this morning, let's remember that the story of our faith calls us to take responsibility for ourselves, to act with courage, humility, and grace in the areas where we can.

For you, that might mean taking responsibility to work towards reconciliation in a relationship, even if it's not "your fault" that things went south. Or it might mean that you need to stand up for yourself in a place where you've been accepting poor treatment from someone else in the hopes that if you name the truth about the ways that you've been treated, others will be spared the pain that you've endured. And it might simply mean that you act as one who keeps the promises that you've made, even if such promises are now inconvenient or even costly to you.

In another part of the Bible this kind of living is held up for us to consider. Psalm 15 reads like this in *The Message*

God, who gets invited to dinner at your place?

How do we get on your guest list?

"Walk straight, act right, tell the truth.

"Don't hurt your friend, don't blame your neighbor; despise the despicable.

"Keep your word even when it costs you, make an honest living, never take a bribe.

"You'll never get blacklisted if you live like this."

As I mentioned last week, the story of Ruth is the story of us. Starting with the actions that we can control, we have got to be people of integrity and reliability. Thanks be to God, that way is open to us. I hope that we are willing to go there, even when the road seems difficult. Amen.