

Ruth: From Victim to Victor
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ruth 3:1-18, Matthew 7:7-8

She was one of the world's most extraordinary ballerinas—magnetic, witty, passionate, thrilling to behold. Then, at the height of her glory, 27-year-old Tanaquil le Clercq was struck down by polio. At first it was feared that the Prima Ballerina would die, but despite the odds she survived. The gravity-defying dancer spent several months confined to an iron lung, followed by years of grueling rehabilitation.

Battling despair and working with the same determination that had made her a star, she eventually got back the use of her arms, her hands and her upper body, but not her magnificent legs. She spent the rest of her life in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the waist down. She never danced, or even walked, again.

You might expect the rest of Tanny's life to be tragic, but it was not. Given a 13 year maximum life expectancy, she lived until age 71 with verve and grace. Her friends said that she refused to be a victim. She found a way to live her life to the fullest, despite a catastrophe that could easily have turned her into a martyr. To her closest friends, her creativity and joie de vivre were at once heartbreaking and inspiring.

How did Tanny prevail? A documentary about her life tells us she took some actions which ultimately saved her from bitterness, professional victimhood, and an over-reliance on others.¹

As soon as she recovered sufficiently and worked through the first waves of terror, shock, rage and despair (in the film, excerpts from her letters reveal her states of mind)—Le Clercq decided to attend the ballet again. She had to overcome her sense of unfairness at seeing her able-bodied colleagues perform the roles that had been created for her. Reemerging in the world of the art she loved, she willingly allowed herself to be viewed in her

¹ A documentary entitled "*Afternoon of a Faun: Tanaquil le Clercq*" tells her life story through footage, photographs, excerpts from her correspondence, and interviews with her partners and friends.

wheelchair. In order to work through such a loss, and retain something precious from it, she found it necessary to face her new reality head on.

Next, she began teaching ballet. The footage of her using, as one student put it, "*her arms as legs and her hands as feet*" is just one example of her skill and passion. To dare to teach dance from a wheelchair meant she had to overcome her envy of younger, able-bodied students. Resolving her grief by so generous and wise a course of action allowed her to be an artist again, and one of the biggest modern influences in the art of ballet.

We are in the third chapter of the story of Ruth, which takes place during the time of Judges. And like the book of Judges, the first chapter of Ruth which we read two weeks ago was full of hopelessness. Starving families forced to move away from their homeland, a mother and two daughters become widows left to fend for themselves.

One of the daughters, Orpah—whose name means gazelle—runs home to the safety of her people and their gods. The other daughter, Ruth—whose name mean friend—remains committed to her mother-in-law Naomi, and her God. Naomi leads her back to Bethlehem where she asks her community to call her Mara—meaning bitter. By the end of chapter 1, God's involvement feels bitter and the future looks hopeless.

In the second chapter, a fresh beginning is at work. Gleaning laws written with the fatherless, refugees and widows in mind keeps the two vulnerable women from a certain starvation. Boaz, a man raised by a faithful harlot, "who just happens" to be very old, single, and respected comes into their lives, and a love connection is made between Ruth and Naomi's kinsman.

We can see what a little hope does for Naomi—it transforms her. She begins to make an elaborate and radical plan to get Ruth married. She coaches her daughter in law to get herself all pretty and perfumed up, go down to where old man Boaz is sleeping off his harvest celebration, uncover his feet and cuddle up next to him. Then just wait for him to tell you what to do next.

Courageously, Ruth follows the instructions, approaches a sleeping Boaz, uncovers his feet, and quietly lies down next to them. At midnight, something startles Boaz (?) so that he turns over to discover every single guys' dream—a beautiful young woman lying next to him. He is shocked and we wait to see his reaction as there are some many ways this can go wrong.

As much as Boaz has shown favor up to this point, Naomi's plan has placed both Ruth and Boaz in a very vulnerable position. The older man could reject her, mock her, accuse her, he could even take advantage of her. Ruth could potentially lose all of the protection and relief that he has offered. One way or another, this relationship will be changed—it will never be the same.

Boaz is moved by her "second kindness". The first kindness was forsaking her first family to commit to Naomi and her family. Her second kindness is forsaking all of the younger more attractive men for boring, but godly, Boaz. Her calling, her mission, her desires, and her decision-making are not driven by something as superficial as personal preferences.

Let's be honest, that is how most of us make major decisions—where we live, where we work, who we marry, even what church we go to. Ruth has not simply evaluated what "*best aligns with what she wants*" out of all the available options; she endeavors to act in accord with trusted counsel and providential opportunity.

But then, there appears to be a little "hiccup" in the plan. Things may not end the way Naomi and Ruth had envisioned. Boaz reports that there is another man who may be better suited to be her husband. Although it would be easy to claim her as his bride, he acts out of respect for the law of God and traditions of his people, and he is not willing to take this easy route even if he can justify the "blessing" it would appear to create. The goal for both Ruth and Boaz isn't in the quick fix, it is redemption.

He allows her to sleep there for the night and acts to protect her from potential scandal by sending her home with a parting gift of barley. When Ruth sees her the next morning, Naomi is looking for the big diamond ring—are you engaged?

Ruth reports back to her all that happened and emphasizes the six measures of barley he gave her was for Naomi—and suddenly we see her emptiness beginning to be filled up by God. In a context in which women were considered property and without agency of their own, Ruth and Naomi have begun the hero's journey from victim to victor.

In the beginning of our reading, driven by a renewed hope, Naomi seized the opportunity and instructed Ruth to act. And act she did. But now, she tells her daughter to WAIT. Sometimes ACTING is the hardest and most radical thing we must do in the moment. But sometimes, it's WAITING.

In the end, what we have here is a love story between a young widow and an older man. But it's also a metaphor for God's relationship with God's people. What moves me more than the actions of these characters is the motivation behind what they do. Naomi was not obligated to find Ruth a husband. Ruth was not obligated to follow her radical plan. And Boaz was not obligated to marry Ruth.

Fear of God is not a primary motivator for most of us here today. Rather, it is the unconditional, undeserved, willful love of Jesus Christ that is more likely to change us. As Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller writes,

"...when you are deeply in love and sure of the other person's unconditional commitment to you, there is a kind of fear motivation. But it is not primarily fear for you — that you may be rejected and hurt —but fear for the other — that he or she will be dishonored and hurt. The love of God motivates us toward a love FOR God. And a love FOR God moves us to live radically, give generously, and love graciously."

Which leads me to ask... what might this story tell us about our own behavior to one another? What does it tell us about those who are in our midst seeking safety and shelter? Boaz provides a way for Ruth to care for Naomi by letting her glean in his fields and making sure there is some extra food left behind for her to gather. He also provides her water and orders the men to leave her alone as she works, keeping her safe and protected. Boaz offers her dinner within the community, and in the end, marries her and gives her children to continue their family name. His kindness is the answer to her request for refuge in God's name.

Kindness erases boundaries and helps us to build bridges of respect and acceptance. All of us, in one way or another, are refugees seeking care and comfort. All of us are vulnerable and fragile in our humanity. When we drop our fears and get to know the stories behind the people we meet, we recognize that each of us is God's children. May we continue to listen to these voices of God among us asking us to show kindness and radical hospitality. Amen.