

*Texts: Ruth: 3:1-22; Matthew 7:7-8*

*Subject: Ruth and Boaz*

*Theme: The First Step*

*Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 28, 2022; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven, and our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

About two weeks ago, the world said goodbye to author Fredrick Buechner, who died at age 96. He's written great and faithful books like "Wishful Thinking: A seeker's ABC," "Godric: A Novel" and "The Remarkable Ordinary: How to Stop, Look, and Listen to Life." I haven't read all his stuff - I want to - but I've always appreciated his style of writing that makes faith not something untouchable, but real and present, and enjoyable. He has a poetic style, and his words often present a picture of the joy of the every day, a passion for living, and a faithful witness.

On the topic of vocation, Buechner once wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where *your deep gladness* and *the world's deep hunger* meet." It's one of his most well-known quotes, and what I love about it is that it acknowledges a balance in the world, and a meaningfulness of life, that draws us to the places where we are called to serve, lead, and live. Many of us long for this kind of sense of fulfillment and stability, along with adventure and joy that can be hard to find at times. We might feel stuck, or get delayed by the big and small calamities of life, and find ourselves off track, lost, or without hope for the future. We wonder, what do I need? What should I do? Where am I supposed to be?

In Ruth's story, she's been there done that. In her young life, she's been through the tragedies of grief and loss, famine, and loneliness. She has demonstrated great love and loyalty by following her mother in law Naomi back to Bethlehem in Judah, declaring,

*“Where you go, I will go, where you stay, I will stay, your people will be my people, and your God my God.”*

She went and was seen by Boaz out gleaning in the field, and Pastor Matt pointed out to us last week how God sees us, too, knows us, and draws near to us in Jesus Christ. That’s powerful. God beckons us to see and notice those others in the world who are so often unseen. But what next? How can we know where to go? How do we take that first step toward those neighbors whom God would have us serve?

Today we hear Ruth taking a bold first step toward a relationship that will bring security, healing and hope for her future. There may have been times in your lives when you’ve had to take a step toward something new, a step into something unsure, or a step forward. Maybe you didn’t know where it would ultimately lead, or what other possibilities might be uncovered.

When I got to Iowa to begin my seminary education, I called up an old radio contact, there in Dubuque. From 2001-2004, I worked for Westwood One Radio Network in Los Angeles, and as part of my job, kept in touch with radio program directors, especially at Country, Classic Rock, and Oldies stations around the U.S. So it had been about six years since I chatted with Ken Pieffer, the head honcho at 103.3 WJOD in Dubuque. So it was a bit of a long shot when I sent an email to him, to let him know I would be coming to town in the summer of 2010. Didn’t hurt to ask, right? He did write back, at first saying he was *not* sure he remembered me, but he agreed to meet for lunch shortly after I arrived in town. We met at the Eagles Club - that local service club that gives scholarships and supports local charities. That day they were serving up a mean pot roast and mountain dew, you know, good midwestern fare. Ken finally did

remember me, and ended up hiring me on to be the Saturday morning country radio DJ. At seven bucks an hour, it was a fun way to get off campus and out into the community to keep my radio skills sharp and get to know some real “Dubuquers.” It was a way for me to share my gifts and joy for radio (if not necessarily my favorite music) and to help add to the staff at the station. Some of the folks at the station still keep in touch to this day, and have reached out to ask for prayer for their families going through a tough time, and I love that *they* still remember me. In those early days, it was a bit of a risk to put myself out there, and I didn’t know what would come if it at first, but it was a first step for me to be a part of life in a new place.

Ruth was still new in town when she was noticed and then welcomed by Boaz to join the women in the field, and had been given access to the full grain stalks, not just the picked over ones, to get the food she needed, to be a part of the group, and to be protected. What more could she ask for? Naomi had something in mind.

She gave her instructions, telling her to anoint herself, to get cleaned up, put on ointment - essential oils, or what we would think of as cosmetics, go the threshing floor, that place where the grain gets separated from the stalks, and gathered up into big piles. It was hard work and late into the night, after he had his supper and maybe a night cap, and had gone to sleep, Ruth *showed up* and did as Naomi asked, uncovering the feet of the man. This intimate setting was a surprise for Boaz, who was probably a bit shocked to see her there. “Who are you?” he asked, maybe not remembering her at first, or unable to see well in the dark, or maybe it’s more of a “who do You think you are?” Ruth isn’t there for anything scandalous, though we might imagine what Naomi had in mind. Ruth is after all, in Hebrew *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor, and “a worthy

woman,” and Boaz is certainly known to be *ish gibbor chayil* - an honorable wealthy, prominent man. She’s come with a request, and once again demonstrates love and loyalty, *hesed* the steadfast love of God - by asking Boaz to “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” She asks him to fulfill a sacred duty, to *show up* for her, and be the one to marry her, to include her as a legitimate part of the family and come to her aid. Boaz recognizes that she was taking a risk. In taking *this* first step, she was entrusting her life to him, demonstrating her loyalty to Naomi, and to her people, fulfilling that promise she made back in Moab. Boaz says, “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.” She is gifted with six measures of barley, a generous token of appreciation from the man, and a sign of good faith. He agrees to do all that she has asked, but first - the chapter ends with a cliffhanger - he must settle the matter with the family. Ruth’s future is about to change.

Naomi’s voice in the story is the one guiding and directing Ruth. The one who has named herself *bitter*, is working for the sake of her daughter in law, and giving her wisdom for the sake of a stable future in which the family would be sustained. She takes a risk too, sending Ruth to the threshing floor. But our lives are like that too. When we hear a word and trust in the one who speaks, it might lead us to a place we never thought we’d go, resulting in new opportunities, ideas, and a new future. When we hear God speaking, we might be afraid. When we are called to change direction, we might wonder about what happens next.

This story reminds us also that God is the one constantly leading us to where we need to go, and always taking the first step toward us. When we come to church or

open our Bibles and hear the Word, we hear of God's loyalty and love for us, God's steadfast love and faithfulness, that gently leads us at times, at others drags us kicking and screaming - to where we are needed most. Sometimes we suffer, a little or a lot, and yet know that God will bring us through. The promise remains: Naomi's suffering will not go unnoticed. Ruth will not be unseen, and their future will not be barren.

Psalm 37:23 says, "Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way;" God is with us as we take our first steps, from the time we are little, learning to walk, learning from family, and beginning to hear the stories of faith. God orders our steps as we grow, leading us to the places where "our deep gladness meets the needs of the world." In faith, we step out into the world, and can move boldly, trusting in the power of God's word with us, strengthening us, and sustaining us everywhere we go. We don't return empty handed either, but get loaded up - not with six measures of barley - not seven bucks an hour - but with God's blessings that we get to carry for the sake of helping and eyes to see all the ways that we get to serve others. Jesus, before he would suffer and die for the whole world, promises his friends that as they turn to God with their burdens and fears and needs, God would hear them and do all that they would ask: "For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (*Matt. 7:8*) *Eventually.*

"Do not be afraid", Boaz says to Ruth. Throughout scripture we can hear this instruction, "Do not be afraid!" You hear it? You too have been freed from fear, through the power of God's living word - God with us in Jesus Christ. You don't have to be afraid of asking for what you need. When our trust is firmly in God, the one who calls us and the one who delivers us, we will not be let down. Does this always happen the way we

want? Probably not. And while our plans might not *always* work out the way we expect them to, God has *always* known what we truly need, and has provided for us the one who welcomes us into the family. His name is Jesus. He is not dead. He is living! Because of Him, we're not outsiders anymore, but seen, heard, welcomed children of God. God in Christ has already taken *the first step*. He comes to us, through the word, through the preaching, through the community of faith who walk with us in all our troubles, and reflect the love and loyalty of God back to us, that we might see a little better how loved and valued we really are. That we would know how necessary we are to one another. That we would know how faithful God has been all along.