

Proper 27, Pentecost 25, Year B
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Vulnerability is the word we use to express the degree to which we are affected by circumstances beyond our control. We can choose to be vulnerable, as when we open our hearts and lives to someone else. We can also find ourselves in a vulnerable situation. Even when we try to be responsible adults, get a good education, and work hard so that our families are provided for, our situation can change at any moment and leave us and people we love vulnerable. Fortunately we are not in the midst of the mass shooting in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh or the Borderline country music bar in Thousand Oaks, California; we are not trying desperately to escape violence in Yemen or Iraq or Central America; we are not fleeing from raging wildfires in California; and hopefully we are not personally touched by the alarming rates of opioid addiction. Yet that doesn't mean there aren't real struggles in our lives, even if they aren't ones that make headlines.

In the reading from the Book of Ruth we hear of two women who, through no fault of their own, have found themselves in a most vulnerable situation. Naomi, who was an Israelite, moved to the land of Moab with her husband and sons. The family settled in Moab, which is modern day Jordan, and their two sons married local women. Then tragedy struck: Naomi's husband and two sons died,

leaving the three women widowed. In ancient Middle Eastern culture it was always precarious to be female, but widows and orphans were the most at risk social groups. A woman had no power of her own and a widow was no longer protected by her father or her husband, and in the case of Naomi, not by sons either. There was no male provider and protector and she was in a foreign country. Naomi told her two daughters in law to return to their families and she herself headed home to Israel. But her daughter in law Ruth loved Naomi so much she would not leave her. Ruth promised instead, **“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”** So Ruth followed Naomi back to Israel, where Jewish Law provided some protection for the vulnerable. First, the Law requires that bits from the harvest be left for the poor to gather so that they can eat. Naomi sent Ruth into the fields of one of Naomi’s husband’s relatives named Boaz, and he instructed his workers to look out for her and to leave a generous amount of food for her. Why would he do such a thing? Boaz said it was because **“All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me.”** Ruth was loyal and compassionate. So was Boaz. There is also a provision in Jewish Law called Levirate marriage, in which the male next of kin is required to marry a widow so that she is still a part of the family. The first male child born to the widow is then considered the son of the dead man so his name is carried on.

Naomi had her eye on Boaz for this provision as well. While Boaz was kind to Ruth, he did not offer to take up the Levirite responsibility, so Naomi decided to give the process a nudge.

While we might raise an eyebrow at the idea of a widow having to marry a husband's nearest male relative, the need for a woman to be married to have both social and financial security is not news. According to US Census data presented by the Institute for Women's Policy Research:

Women are more likely than men to live below the federal poverty line. Just over 16 percent of women and girls in the United States (an estimated 25.9 million women and girls) are poor compared with 13.4 percent of the male population...women between 18 and 24 years old have the highest poverty rate at 21.9 percent, followed by children under 18...Single mothers head 19.0 percent of all families in 2014, and these families are disproportionately poor. More than half of all families living in poverty (50.3 percent) are headed by single women...a substantial share of women aged 45 and older are poor. More than one in ten women aged 60-64 and 65 years and older live below the federal poverty line...the number of older women living in poverty is nearly double the number of older men who are poor.

Until recently it was extremely difficult for a single woman to have either social or economic security, and it is still a challenge for many. That point was brought home in a comical way in the movie *The Help*, which is set in the 1960s. When Skeeter Phelan returned home from college and wanted to pursue a career as a writer, her mother was dismayed that Skeeter had not yet found a fiancé. When a young man expressed interest in Skeeter even after a disastrous first date, she was disdainful. Her mother, however, was ecstatic. The mother ran upstairs to pull

together an outfit for Skeeter while the young man waited on the porch. Skeeter told her mother no. She did not want to go out with him because he was obnoxious and she hated him. Her mother's response was to say, **“Love and hate are two horns on the same goat. And we need to find you a goat.”**

Naomi wanted Boaz to be that goat for Ruth. We learn that there was another male relative who was entitled to claim Ruth and the land owned by her father in law. Boaz publicly cleared that claim. What is significant is that Boaz noted some valuable qualities in Ruth. When Ruth offered herself to him 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.”** There is enough age difference for Boaz to call her **“my daughter.”** Her willingness to bypass younger, possibly richer men than Boaz to marry her late husband's next of kin in honor of him is even more impressive than her loyalty to Naomi in Boaz's eyes. Ruth, though vulnerable as a young widow, gives all she has for the love of others, namely her mother in law and her late husband. She entrusts herself and her future to a people and a God she does not know. Ruth's loyalty and love are rewarded in an astonishing way: the baby she bears is Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. This means that ***Ruth, the widowed foreigner from Moab, becomes the great-grandmother of King David and a direct ancestor of Jesus.***

Ruth is not the only widow who gives all she has in a profound gesture of trust in God. In the Gospel today we hear of the widow who offers her last two coins to the Temple treasury, which is noted by Jesus. He says, “...**this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she has to live on.**” This widow, like Ruth, was already vulnerable. Yet she chose to make herself completely vulnerable, placing her trust in God. Who among us is willing to quietly entrust our whole selves to God? Good stewardship is about far more than the amount on a pledge card. After all, two copper coins are not an impressive gift unless you know what they represent. God knows exactly what our offering is. As Ruth and the widow in the Gospel make evident, God notes our willingness to offer ourselves and to be vulnerable. We may be vulnerable in ways no one knows. Like Skeeter in *The Help*, we might look like average people on the outside and be responding to God courageously on the inside. Or we may be understandably wary of vulnerability. God calls us, just like Ruth and the widow in the Gospel, to trust ourselves more and more to God. There are no guarantees, yet Ruth’s faithfulness led to the family into which Jesus, God Incarnate, was born. It is yet to be revealed how Jesus might create new life in and through each one of us, but we are asked to risk believing that he will. Amen