

June 7 2020 – Trinity Sunday

This is another special Sunday in our church year: Trinity Sunday.
 Well, really every Sunday is Trinity Sunday
 – we celebrate and pray to and encounter the Triune God
 every time we worship, every day that we are Christian.
 But today, we're acknowledging that all three Persons of the Trinity
 exist together as One Divine Being,
 one God, always and forever.
 We have lots of names for God's Three Persons:
 Creator, Redeemer and Comforter;
 Sovereign, Teacher, and Advocate;
 Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 God is Three-in-One; and the mystery and wonder of it,
 is that wherever we find One, all Three are present.
 But there's only a few moments in the Bible
 where we get to see all Three Persons distinctly,
 the Triune God's Oneness unfolded before us.
 The baptism of Jesus is one of those moments.
 It's a brief glimpse of what the life of the Trinity is like;
 and it's infused with unity and with mutual love.
 Let's read it together now from Matthew 3:13-17:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"
 Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.
 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Ruth Scripture Reading: Ruth 3:1-18

Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, shouldn't I find rest for you, so that you will be taken care of? ² Now isn't Boaz our relative? Haven't you been working with his female servants? This evening he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. ³ Wash, put on perfumed oil, and wear your best clothes. Go down to the threshing floor, but don't let the man know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, notice the place where he's lying, go in and uncover his feet, and lie down. Then he will explain to you what you should do."

⁵ So Ruth said to her, "I will do everything you say." ⁶ She went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law had charged her to do. ⁷ After Boaz ate, drank, and was in good spirits, he went to lie down at the end of the pile of barley, and she came secretly, uncovered his feet, and lay down.

⁸ At midnight, Boaz was startled, turned over, and there lying at his feet was a woman! ⁹ So he asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Ruth, your servant," she replied. "Take me under your wing, for you are a family redeemer."

¹⁰ Then he said, "May the Lord bless you, my daughter. You have shown more kindness now than before, because you have not pursued younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ Now don't be afraid, my daughter. I will do for you whatever you say, since all the people in my town know that you are a woman of noble character. ¹² Yes, it is true that I am a family redeemer, but there is a redeemer closer than I am. ¹³ Stay here tonight, and in the morning, if he wants to redeem you, that's good. Let him redeem you. But if he doesn't want to redeem you, as the Lord lives, I will. Now lie down until morning."

¹⁴ So she lay down at his feet until morning but got up while it was still dark. Then Boaz said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." ¹⁵ And he told Ruth, "Bring the shawl you're wearing and hold it out." When she held it out, he shoveled six measures of barley into her shawl, and she went into the town.

¹⁶ She went to her mother-in-law, Naomi, who asked her, "What happened, my daughter?" Then Ruth told her everything the man had done for her. ¹⁷ She said, "He gave me these six measures of barley, because he said, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

¹⁸ Naomi said, "My daughter, wait until you find out how things go, for he won't rest unless he resolves this today."

Message: Winnowing

There is tremendous satisfaction in a big, long job finished and done well.

Think back to something that took you ages to do.

Maybe a building project or renovation,

something for your work,

or maybe spring cleaning the house, top to bottom;

that last nail hammered in, the last word written,

the last cupboard cleaned...

...or maybe the last batch

of St. Andrew's shortbread,

baked and boxed.

It felt good to be done, satisfying to have done it well.

Coming from a farming background,

I have spent many days in the hot sun every summer,

cutting and raking and baling hay,

and then stacking hundreds or even thousands of haybales

in sheds and barns.

I also remember very well

the feeling of stowing

that last haybale in the loft.

It's relief, that the job was done for the year;

but it's also a feeling of security and abundance,
 knowing that all our animals
 would have enough to eat all winter long.
 Getting the hay in is a huge weight off a farmer's mind.
 I imagine Boaz felt much the same,
 when he finished harvesting his grain
 that year.

Weeks of work, long into the evening,
 and finally his granary is full.
 Abundance and security,
 and enough to look after himself
 and those he's responsible for, until next year's harvest.
 So Boaz eats, drinks and celebrates,
 and then collapses on his heap of grain
 for a well-earned night's rest.
 But there is something even greater on its way to Boaz,
 something that will fill his heart, as well as his granary.
 When we take up Ruth's story today,
 some weeks – the rest of the harvest season – have passed.
 Because of Ruth's courage in going out into the fields
 and Boaz' generosity in return,
 the two women have been doing alright.

But Naomi is beginning to worry about Ruth's future, long-term.
 And she knows that Boaz is a good man,
 so Naomi encourages Ruth to approach him,
 seeking a more lasting rescue
 from their uncertain situation.

So Ruth sheds her widow's clothes,
 visibly setting aside her grief and mourning,
 and goes to Boaz.
 It's striking that there is no mention of danger;
 before, both Naomi and Boaz were very clearly worried
 that Ruth as a young foreign widow
 would be assaulted or harmed
 when she went places alone.
 This time, though, there's no risk;
 perhaps because she is known now, in the community...
 ...but mostly because she is going to Boaz, who would never hurt her.

Ruth sneaks in and curls up at Boaz' feet
 – which seems an odd, uncomfortable act, from our perspective.

But what she's trying to do is
physically remind him of her vulnerability and need.

And of course, Ruth being who she is,
manages to be both vulnerable
and mind-blowingly courageous and bold
at the same time.

When Boaz wakes in the night, she asks him to marry her,
using the same language of protection and refuge
– of being taken under a protector's wing –
that he himself used the first time they met.
And she reminds him that he is her "family redeemer,"
A legal role in Israelite society
that would let him save her.

The process of harvesting grain is mostly unchanged since Boaz' day,
although we've got mechanical equipment that does it now,
instead of people power.

When the grain is ripe, the stalk is cut.
Threshing loosens the edible bit of the grain from the rest of the plant;
in Boaz' day, this was done by beating bundles of grain
on a threshing floor.
Winnowing was done in the evenings,
to take advantage of the breeze
to blow the chaff away,
leaving only the essential,
edible grain behind.

When it comes to understanding God's saving work in the world,
redemption is kind of like the final product of the harvest;
all the straw and chaff are gone,
and we are left with the essential heart of our faith.

Understanding God as the Trinity is one of the
brain-bending moments of our Christian faith;
how is God our Creator and also Jesus and also the Holy Spirit?
And yet we know that God is all three
and one at the same time.
I find one of the simpler ways of thinking about the Trinity
is through our own experience of what God does for us and in us.
And the essential work of God in the world is redemption.

As immense and powerful and mysterious as our Creator God is,
as complex and awe-inspiring...

...what we see from the very beginning, in Genesis chapter 1,
is also a God who wants to have a close relationship with us.

When that breaks down,
God does not withdraw from us or cut us off;
he gives more.

Through Christ's death and resurrection,
and the promise of a coming kingdom,
God makes healing and restoration possible,
he offers us hope and a future
where life is full and abundant again;
where the relationship between God and us
is restored and made new once more.
And even now, that future, that new abundant life,
is alive in us
through the power of the Holy Spirit.
This is redemption:
what is broken is made whole,
what's lost is found,
what is empty, filled abundantly once more.

All this to bring us back into the relationship with God
that we were always meant to have.

When Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz
and reminds him that he is able,
by the laws of Israelite society,
to redeem her family...
...Boaz is blown away.

Ruth is younger than him and of noble character,
and he thinks she's a bit of a catch
for any young man in their community.
But she's chosen him,
asked him to save her and Naomi...
...and Boaz immediately starts planning out
how he can do it.

In the first part of chapter 4,
 we read about his negotiations with the elders
 and other potential family redeemers,
 and how he claims Ruth as his wife,
 and takes Naomi and her dead husband's property
 into his care.
 And all these promises are witnessed
 by the whole community.
 It's done; Ruth and Naomi are redeemed,
 rescued from uncertainty and an empty future;
 and Boaz has a new and fulfilling relationship in his life, too.
 There is a really subtle and beautiful gesture
 that Boaz makes in this story.
 Before he sends Ruth home to Naomi,
 he loads her up with as much barley as she can carry,
 because he doesn't want her to go home
 empty-handed to her mother-in-law.
 When Naomi and Ruth first came back to Judah,
 Naomi mourned and lamented
 that she had returned home bitter and empty,
 with no real future for either of them.
 And now...what was empty is full.
 Hope is restored, the future secure.

Ruth's story of redemption
 – her life transformed and restored, and Naomi's along with her –
 is like an image of God's big story of redeeming creation,
 made small and personal so we can understand.
 God acts through Boaz to transform Ruth's life;
 from widow to foreigner
 to field worker to wife,
 all of the broken pieces of her life
 are healed, renewed and transformed.
 From her economic insecurity
 to her grieving heart,
 all Ruth's needs are met abundantly.
 And you can see this transformation,
 this journey that Ruth makes,
 in what we read today.

She sheds her widow's clothes,
 letting go of her old self and old life,
 so she can put on the new life that being redeemed will offer her.
 She makes what should be a risky move

– going to Boaz alone in the middle of the night –
and yet it isn't risky at all, because of who Boaz is.
She is vulnerable and in great need,
and yet she is bold enough
to ask for redemption
and brave enough
to accept the changes that it'll bring to her life.
If this journey Ruth makes
on that night at the end of the harvest so long ago
sounds familiar to you,
that's good – it should.
We are all Ruth;
her journey is the same journey we all make
when we reach out to our Triune God
and are drawn into
the new abundant life
and transforming, saving love
he offers us.
We are all Ruth.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.