

The Rev. Christine Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 10, 2012
Ruth 3: 1-5; 4:13-17

We are now solidly in the month of November... which means my attention turns to... Thanksgiving! This might be my favorite holiday, as it is filled with yummy food and is blessedly free of the pressure of gift-giving. As I get older, my appreciation grows for the opportunity to gather with my beloved, and to feast and express gratitude for all the blessings of this life.

Growing up, like in many households, my family feasted on Thanksgiving dinner. There was mashed potatoes, green beans, stuffing, and cranberry sauce. Oh, yes, and GRAVY! The crowning glory, of course, was the roasted turkey. It came out of the oven beautiful and brown, and smelling so delicious. My very favorite part, however, has always been the pickings – those illicit and most delicious bits I would steal from the uncarved turkey as it was resting on the counter and no one was looking. Nothing tasted better than those stolen bites!

It was always amazing to me just how many meals we could make from that one turkey: the Thanksgiving Day dinner itself, sandwiches the next few days, and at least one or two other full dinners from the leftovers. And then, finally, when it seemed that there were just no more meals to be carved from the bones, my mother would then set about picking the remaining bits and pieces of meat. Every year, I was skeptical – I mean, how much more meat could there possibly be? That carcass was surely picked clean! But after a bit of work, my mother managed to glean a small mountain of meat. Where did all of that come from?

To this day, it remains a continual surprise to me how much value and goodness can be found among the remains. Sometimes, abundance can be found hidden within scarcity, and blessings encountered in surprising places.

The book of Ruth is one of the shortest books in our canon of scripture. It is a mere four short chapters and has the brevity and intensity of storyline that is more like a short story than a book. The story of Ruth is a story of loyalty, love of family, and generosity toward strangers. It is a story of vulnerability and risk-taking; of trust and surrender; and of restoration of status, security, and destiny that prefigures the promised restoration of Israel, and, ultimately, of all creation. Ruth was a young Moabite woman who married into a family of Israelites who, because there was a famine in Israel, was living in Moab. Moab was located in the land to the east of the Dead Sea. There had been many territorial disputes between Israel and Moab, and most of the references to the Moabites in the Bible are hostile or derogatory. Ruth's people were the "other."

When Ruth's young husband died, her mother-in-law, Naomi, decided to return home to Israel. The famine had ended by then and there was nothing to keep Naomi in Moab, as she had also lost her own husband and her two sons. Naomi and Ruth both were vulnerable and without means of protection or support. So, Naomi advised her daughter-in-law to stay in Moab and try to find a husband from among her own people.

When Ruth said she wanted to go with her to Israel, Naomi tried to talk her out of it. Ruth was un-swayed by Naomi's arguments that staying was the best thing for her, and she responded that the two of them had been through a lot together thus far and that her home was with Naomi. "Where you go, I go," Ruth told her, and "your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

So, Naomi gave in, and the two husband-less and son-less women went to Bethlehem, just at the beginning of the barley harvest. It is ironic that their entrance into Israel falls at the time of abundance and plenty, as their particular situation is one of destitution and scarcity. And Naomi is not just a little resentful about her situation, telling the people who greet her return that she should no longer be called Naomi, which means pleasant, but rather Mara, which means bitter.

While Naomi sees only what she has lost, Ruth is more optimistic and is able to spot opportunity in this time of harvest. She tells Naomi that she will go into the fields and glean, following behind a friendly reaper. Now, gleaning is the act of collecting leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been harvested. In many ancient cultures, gleaning was promoted as an early form of a welfare system. According to Hebrew law, farmers should leave the corners of their fields unharvested, and they should not attempt to pick up what had dropped or was missed in the harvesting. These are to be left for widows, strangers, and orphans – in other words, for the poor and vulnerable.

While Ruth was hard at work gleaning in the fields, she is noticed by one of the field owners, Boaz. It turns out that Boaz was a distant relative of her late husband, and he must have taken a shine to her because he orders the reapers not to bother her. A poor, alien, and widowed woman working alone in the fields among many men was vulnerable to harassment and possible attack. Boaz, knowing of her loyalty and devoted service to his distant cousin Naomi, instructs Ruth to stay in his fields as he can ensure her safety there. Boaz offers her a meal and protects a grateful Ruth as she gleans the fields to feed Naomi and herself.

When Ruth returns to Naomi with her measures of barley at the end of the day, she tells her about Boaz and how he favored and protected her, even though she was a foreigner. Naomi, who was nobody's fool, knew very well that Boaz must be sweet on Ruth. Knowing that Boaz would be a good catch for her and would be able to take care of her, Naomi tells Ruth to clean up and dress nicely because she had a mission that night.

Naomi instructed her that as soon as Boaz had eaten a good supper and polished off a nightcap or two, he would bed down on the threshing floor and go to sleep. And around midnight, Ruth should slip out to the barn and slide in next to him. Naomi tells Ruth, trust me, Boaz is a good man. So, Ruth followed Naomi's instructions, and it worked like a charm. Boaz was so overwhelmed that the young and lovely Ruth would pay attention to an old man like him that he fell for her completely and married her.

After a while, they had a son named Obed, and Naomi came to take care of him and stayed with them the rest of her life. It seems with this turn of fortunes; Naomi was Mala no longer – was bitter no more – and now rejoiced in how the Lord had blessed them all. In the end, all were redeemed: Naomi who had become destitute and bitter, Ruth who had lost her husband and then became a foreigner in a new land, and Boaz who had longed for love. All of them found the abundance of love and life a surprising place.

From these three people, God's redemption rippled outward, as it often does, and touched so many more. Our brief story of Ruth ends with a genealogy and the surprising and joyous revelation that Ruth of Moab is the great-grandmother of King David himself. God's fearsome work of restoration and reconciliation often works through unlikely people in surprising ways. With God at work in the world, you just never know what might come from showing generosity and love to a stranger.

Here at Good Shepherd, we are a parish of gracious generosity, to neighbor and stranger alike. We are a community that understands the value of giving and our responsibility to share our abundance with others who lack. We are a parish who shares our treasure, time, attention, and love freely with those who are vulnerable and in need.

And here are some of the ways we share with our neighbors. In the past year, we provided more than 300 neighbor-families with Thanksgiving meals; prepared and distributed over 5,100 hot meals to the hungry, and provided over 200 weekend meal bags to children at our local elementary school. Last Christmas, we also supported local families so they may provide Christmas gifts for 120 children and youth in the greater DMV area.

Additionally, we participated in three food drives, a school supplies drive, a baby supplies drive, and a children's book collection – all to support our neighbors and enrich their lives. We also

gave out grocery store cards and gas cards to those who come to our campus in acute need. We provided 24-hour sheltered access to our Foyer Food Basket, supplying countless tonnage of groceries per year for our neighbors experiencing food insecurity. And we assembled and distributed Grace Bags for all to take and give out to the unhoused individuals we encounter.

As living and active members of the Body of Christ, we are called to share our harvest with our neighbors and strangers, alike. We are called to be attentive to the unexpected relationships that may form in a time of generosity that benefit not only the receiver but the giver and the larger community as well. And we are called to give freely of ourselves for love's sake, and to trust that when we do, our gifts become holy and sacraments in the world, with the grace of generosity and love rippling outward to countless others.

The book of Ruth teaches us that grace may be found in unexpected places; that redemption may be found in chance encounters; and that abundance may be found even among the remains.

Amen.