

October 7, 2018: Journey worship

THEME: Re-building

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

“The measure of our humanity is how we serve the most vulnerable amongst us.” This wise quote was named by Eye surgeon and TED fellow, Andrew Bastawrous.

Bastawrous was twelve by the time he had an eye test, at the insistence of his teachers. Although he had been labeled lazy, and wasn't succeeding in school he hesitated to complain about his eyes for fear of sticking out in his class. When he finally had his eyes checked, he was stunned to learn what poor eyesight he had. He not only saw stars in the night sky for the first time, but went from a failing child at school to thriving. He soon visited his parents' native country of Egypt where he realized that not every child had the same access to eye care that he had as a child. He said, “How is it we live in a world where glasses, that completely changed my life have been around for 700 years, yet two and a half billion people still can't access them.”¹ He vowed to make a difference.

As I said, he became an eye surgeon, and he and his wife established more than 100 eye clinics throughout Kenya since 2012. In 2011 they launched a smart phone app that “makes it possible for people in the community to find people in their homes, the most vulnerable groups who are being missed, and made it easier to diagnose them and connect them to services.” In one year, this technology enabled 25 teachers to offer vision screening for 21,000 children in nine days. This technology expanded to serve over 200,000 children throughout the school district, and has been repeated in 6 programs in different countries.

“The measure of our humanity is how we serve the most vulnerable amongst us.”

The theme for this month at Journey is “Re-building.” And many of us know this theme all too well in our own lives. We have had to re-build after a restructuring at work, a conflict in a relationship, a long-term illness, a move to a new town. Frequently the need to re-build is associated with loss and the need to start again—after a divorce, a financial hit, the loss of a loved one. But we re-build anytime we need a fresh start, a new perspective, or a major shift in our lives. We take what we've got and we start building, even if we construct something that looks radically different than what was in place before.

The book of Ruth is a story of re-building. Many of us are familiar with the opening chapter of this book, where we learn that three women have lost everything. Naomi is the matriarch of the family, and she and her two daughters-in-law are leaving their home following the deaths of their respective husbands and famine has hit the land. They have no one to take care of them in a society in which women could do little to take care of themselves. Without a man in their lives they could not own property or earn money.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_bastawrous

Unless taken into the home of a relative, they would remain destitute in a land in which famine had struck. They needed to move on or die.

Many of us have heard how Naomi tried to send the two younger women back to their families of origin. It is her hope that they might start over, marry again, have children. And Orpah does return to the security of her family.

But Ruth remains, making a promise to her mother-in-law that she will not leave her side. They journey to Bethlehem to rebuild their lives in Naomi's hometown, hearing that there was food for God's people.

Our text for this morning continues this story. Ruth goes to the field to glean—to pick up what was left behind by the harvesters so that she and Naomi might have food, even for a few days. Israel had laws about the process of gleaning as a means to ensure that the most vulnerable in society had access to food. Those who harvest were to leave the edges of the fields untouched, and were to leave behind any grain that they missed so that they might be picked up and consumed by those who had none. And so Ruth joined those who were poor and hungry and picked up sheaves of grain left behind in the fields.

Enter Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi and the owner of the land. He notices Ruth as the stranger among them, and hears her story. He has already heard of her. He knows that she has given up any hope for her own future in order to care for her mother in law, whose own future prospects were more dire than her own. And so he looks out for her. He invites her to glean from his field along with his workers. He instructs the women to look after her and the men to keep their hands off of her. He offers her water and food set aside for his hired hands. He blesses her.

The world in which Ruth, Naomi and Boaz lived was harsh. There were great divides—certainly between women and men, but also among racial groups, classes, and those of different ethnicities. Inequality was the norm. Institutionalized sexism, classism and racism were woven into the fabric of the culture. The world could be rough. Famine was a frequent reality. Water was often scarce. Labor was back-breaking. People knew that life was often unfair and that an illness or dry spell could mean you lost everything.

Yet both Ruth and Boaz show us a possible response to life's rough conditions. They manifest a paradigm for rebuilding that doesn't destine the most vulnerable to certain death. Rather, they use whatever measure of power and privilege they have to ensure that those who are more vulnerable than them are safe. Ruth's own personal prospects for security lay in her return to her family of origin. Once there, her father could ensure that she was cared for, that she was restored to society, that she could find another husband. She forgoes that knowing that Naomi had no such possibility of her own. Naomi was, literally, alone in the world. She would live as a destitute widow relying on the benevolence of strangers. And so Ruth sticks with her, knowing that her mother-in-law is more vulnerable than she is. She knows that, possibly, because of her youth and strength she can help make sure that Ruth is safe. She follows her to her hometown.

She works tirelessly to ensure that Naomi is fed. She gives her mother-in-law standing by her insistence on staying by her side. She uses what little power and privilege she has to care for Naomi.

And then Boaz, a man of means and security recognizes Ruth's vulnerability too. He knows she and Naomi will starve without food. He knows that she will be a target of sexual harassment or assault because of her age, widowhood and foreign status. He knows that she has surrendered her hope for security and made herself more vulnerable to care for another. And so he does right by her, ensuring that she had more than her share of food, ensuring her safety from predatory men, including her into the community.

The story sounds so simple. We've heard the lesson before: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." We see their actions as simple courtesies, yet we know all too well that the choices modeled by Ruth and Boaz are rarities now, as they were then.

We continue to live in a predatory society in which the vulnerable are frequently targeted—marked by Payday Loans, Facebook hacks, and a sense that no one can truly be trusted. Modern movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo remind us that racial injustice—sometimes even at the hands of the police—persists, and that women continue to be catcalled, harassed, and even assaulted on the streets, at high school parties, and in the workplace. And as our nation prepares to celebrate a holiday still labeled Columbus day—named for a man whose "discovery" of our nation was founded in the enslavement or slaughter of the Indigenous people of the land, we are reminded that our nation's claim of liberty and justice for all really means liberty and justice for white, straight, cis, Christian, wealthy males *first*, and usually a watered down or distorted variation for the rest of us, depending on how many layers of privilege we don. And some are outright oppressed.

The world still isn't fair.

But Ruth and Boaz remind us that there is a life-giving response that can make all the difference. There is a choice that can be made that reflects the *hesed* or steadfast love of God—that puts God's grace into action in our world. "*The measure of our humanity is how we serve the most vulnerable amongst us.*"

What if, we shift some focus off of our own needs, so that we can stop and focus on the needs of another—someone with less opportunity, someone with greater need, someone whose voice often goes unheard, someone with more to fear...?

What if we, like Bastawrous and Ruth and Boaz made the needs of the vulnerable not just an occasional good deed or even a philanthropy, but a *priority*? What if we stopped and noticed the needs of others, and then stopped and assessed what we had to give? What if our observations yielded action—What if we gave generously and freely so that someone else might be healthier, included, safe and loved?

Carry the backpack of the classmate on crutches so that they can safely navigate hallways at school.

Drop off a meal for the exhausted new parents so that they might catch their breath.

Drive your neighbor to their cancer treatment.

Believe the story of someone who'd been marginalized, oppressed or abused.

Own your privilege. Dare to surrender some privilege for the wellbeing of others.

Tell someone who has heard otherwise that God loves them.

Vote.

Make up your own list. But first, open your eyes to the need around you. Ask the questions you need to ask to find out the stories of those you meet. And then ask yourself, what can you do to make life better for someone who is more vulnerable than you.

Because, see, God is with us when we stand with the least of God's children, when we embody compassion, when we incarnate love. That is what God, in Christ, has done for us.

Thanks be to God.