

"Beyond The Minimum"
Ruth 2:1-13/Matthew 18:15-22

Ruth didn't need to ask permission. Boaz wasn't required to offer protection. Yet both of them took those additional steps and in so doing changed their future.

We have been focusing on the story of Ruth in recent weeks, recalling how after the death of her husband she insisted on moving with her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. Naomi urged her to stay in Moab, but Ruth would not be dissuaded. Boaz was the kinsman of Naomi's father-in-law; a wealthy man and a prominent citizen in Bethlehem. In the verses we read, the two meet.

One day, Ruth says to her mother-in-law "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." The law in ancient Israel was clear that owners of fields, orchards, and vineyards were forbidden from harvesting their entire crop. Instead they were required to leave the produce along the edges of the field and any other that they missed so that widows and orphans might pick food for themselves. The requirement was so well-known that someone going to glean didn't have to ask if it was alright, but instead could simply fall in place behind the workers. That's what Ruth wanted to do. Naomi consented.

"As it happened," we read, "[Ruth] came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." When he arrives later and sees her, a worker tells that Ruth is the Moabite who has returned to Bethlehem with Naomi. He reports how when she appeared that day Ruth had said "Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves." He adds that she has worked diligently all day.

Boaz is intrigued and goes to Ruth. "Now listen, my daughter," he says "do not go to glean in another field or leave this one but keep close to my young women...I have ordered the young men not to bother you," he continues and encourages her to ask for water from the men whenever she needs it. "Why have I found favor in your sight," she asks "that you have taken notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" Boaz tells of learning all that she has done. "May the LORD reward you for your deeds," he says "and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" A grateful Ruth accepts.

That's a quick summary of events. It sets the stage for what will come next yet we stop at this point to ponder its glimpse of two persons who did more than what was required. Their choice is worthy of celebrating because we all know of times when persons do something less. As there has never been a teacher who on introducing material has not been asked at least once "Will this be on the test?" There has never been a supervisor who hasn't requested a member of her team to help with a new task only to hear "That's not in my job description." There has never been a marriage counselor who hasn't heard a client lament "My spouse doesn't pay attention to me the way he/she used to." Such comments arise because many times persons are content to live at the minimum. To learn only what will be tested. To do only what is required to keep one's job. To offer only enough energy at home to keep the peace. That kind of approach can permeate life and it cheats both the one who has chosen to live in that way and others.

To be sure, we need minimums. In the case of gleaning, since most widows in that era had lost all means of supporting themselves, the law had been established to ensure that at the very least, widows wouldn't go hungry and that landowners would do their part to help.

In a perfect world, spelling out a minimum wouldn't be necessary, but since the world has always been far from ideal, minimums are essential. Having minimum safety regulations protects

the public. Having minimum grades for athletes helps students understand the greater importance of getting an education. Having minimum standards to remain on a church roll helps members understand the priority God is to have in their lives. Minimums set a basic level of faith or care or competence that make a difference as without such levels all kinds of problems can emerge.

The story is told of a new pastor who was checking on the level of knowledge in the Church School. In an elementary-age class, the pastor asked one student "Who knocked down the walls of Jericho?" and a child replied "It sure wasn't me, Reverend." The pastor turned to the teacher and asked if that response was a sample of the kind of instruction the children were receiving and the volunteer answered "Now Reverend, Timmy is a good boy and doesn't tell lies. If he says he didn't do it, I believe him." Now really upset, the pastor referred the matter to the officers and asked for a reply. After a time of deliberation the chairperson sent a message back: "We see no point in making an issue of the incident. The board will pay for the damages to the wall and charge it off to vandalism." (*Presbyterians Today*, July/August 1995, p. 3)

Minimums are needed in all aspects of life. The challenge, of course, comes when they become a ceiling; when persons do only what is required and nothing more.

That warning can be inferred from our reading in Matthew. In it, Jesus begins a conversation about what should happen if two members of the church have a dispute with each other. The fact that he names such a scenario before the church exists reflects his understanding of what can happen whenever humans get together. In such times, he says the best approach is to go to that fellow member privately and seek restoration. Should that not prove effective, Jesus outlines a series of escalating steps--taking one or two others to serve as witnesses and bringing the matter to the whole church. Should even those steps not result in reconciliation, he speaks of removal. Our denomination's *Rules of Discipline* builds upon that instruction from Jesus. He then ends by saying "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

It is then that Peter asks "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" In that era, there was a widely-accepted view that if you forgave someone three times you need not forgive them again. Thus, for Peter to ask if he should forgive as many as seven times was extravagant. Even so, Jesus replies "Not seven times, but I tell you seventy-seven [or as other translations put it 'seventy times seven'] times."

Jesus wasn't telling Peter or future disciples that the minimum for forgiveness has been raised from 3 to 77 or 490 occasions. He wasn't suggesting that when it comes to forgiving others that we secure an accountant to keep track of how many times we have extended that gift and when occasion number 78 or 491 arises we can turn away in good conscience. Rather, Jesus is declaring there is no maximum, but in acts of forgiveness, too, we are to respond with our best.

That same approach shaped the actions of Ruth and Boaz long ago when one asked permission and the other offered his protection. Think of how differently their lives would have turned out had both done only what was required. If Ruth had lived at the minimum she could have gone out to glean without a word and likely missed out on meeting the man who was to become her husband. If I have just spoiled the plot, I apologize! If Boaz had done only what the law required, he would have paid no attention to the widow and turned toward other matters. Had they chosen to live at the minimum they would have missed the future God intended, but because they chose differently events continued along the path for which they had been made.

Such an outcome is not limited to ancient times as the potential is present for us, too. Our times of living beyond the minimum may not change history and will certainly not become part of Scripture. Yet our times of acting beyond what is required can transform lives still.

By now, I would suspect most of you have heard of James Shaw, Jr. He is the man who was eating a meal early last Sunday morning at a Waffle House restaurant near Nashville when terror struck. Shots from outside began as a young man fired his weapon into the dining area. Four people died and four more wounded, yet it could have been much worse. Shaw later told what happened when he saw the assailant reload just after entering the restaurant. "I acted in a blink of a second," he said. "I looked at him, and he wasn't looking at me. He just had the barrel down. It was like 'Do it now. Go now.' I just took off." Shaw scuffled with the man, seized the weapon and threw it over the counter. The shooter ran. He was arrested the next day.

Appropriately, James Shaw is being viewed as a hero even though he resists such talk. "I know I saved other people," he humbly replied. "I have a 4-year-old daughter; I didn't even think about her. In the midst of it, I was just trying to save myself."

Like you, I was inspired by his courage, but the story doesn't end there. After being treated for his injuries, Shaw went to his church and the next day to the Vanderbilt University Medical Center trauma unit in order to visit two women who had survived the shooting. When he walked into Room No. 26, the trauma surgeon turned to the father of the bandaged young woman and said "Have you met James? James saved a lot of lives." In recalling what came next, Shaw said "We had a father moment when we saw each other. If you can imagine...your child being there and meeting the person who saved their child, it was very touching." As if that hospital visit alone wasn't going above and beyond, Shaw also started a GoFundMe page and contributed to it as well for support to the injured and families. As of this morning, it has topped \$188,000. Someone else started one for him. It sits at \$200,000. (Blinder, Alan. "I Just Wanted to Live,' Says Man Who Wrestled Rifle from Waffle House Gunman," *New York Times*, 4/24/81, A15)

Beyond the minimum. A modern-day believer reveals what can happen when we act in that way as do Ruth and Boaz. Two individuals who refused to do only what was required and as a result experienced a joy in life that they would have otherwise missed. Following their example doesn't guarantee that if we live in similar fashion we'll find our prince or princess, become valedictorian of our class or be named Citizen of the Year. Living in that way will not ensure we get the promotion or drive in the game-winning run or that all dreams will come true.

Yet the choice by two ancestors in the faith does suggest that if we choose to live life to the fullest, if we decide to go beyond the minimum of what is expected of us, too, that life as we know it will never be the same. And even more importantly, we will never be the same either.