

“The Gift of Witnesses”
Ruth 4:1-12/Acts 1:6-9

“Can I get a witness?”

In African-American churches, worshipers occasionally hear that phrase from the pulpit. To those parishioners such words mean “is there anyone here who can identify with what I’m saying?” So when the preacher says “Can I get a witness?” she or he is inviting the listener to respond in a way that acknowledges the speaker is on track and encourages them to keep going.

In the Old Testament reading before us, we see someone seeking witnesses, too, and even though the setting is not a time of worship, the impact is similar as those verses describe how Boaz sets out to fulfill a promise to Ruth. Last week, we recalled how he had told that young widow he would serve as next-of-kin, providing both financial security and marrying her if a closer kinsman declined. The tradition behind those words is unclear and positively unromantic, but in that culture, custom or good manners suggested another relative had right of first refusal.

The next day Boaz goes to the city gate, a place where legal transactions often occurred and while waiting on a bench, the next-of-kin appears. “Come over, friend,” Boaz says. Even though our text translates the word as “friend” the Hebrew noun actually means “So-and-So,” not because Boaz didn’t know the man’s name, but perhaps because the author didn’t want to embarrass the man given what is about to happen. “So-and-So” is clunky; we’ll call him Ben.

Boaz invites ten elders to serve as witnesses and tells his kinsman that Naomi has some land to sell that belonged to their relative Elimelech and that Ben has first option. This is the first we’ve heard in our reflection of recent weeks that Naomi owned any land and instead have read frequently of the economic insecurity faced by Naomi and her daughter-in-law. Perhaps Boaz is referring to land Naomi and Elimelech sold before going to Moab that she cannot afford to redeem. We aren’t told, but upon learning of the situation, Ben says he will redeem it.

“There’s just one more thing,” Boaz says and adds how in acquiring the land, he also will marry Ruth “to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.” Boaz’s words do not suggest that he viewed Ruth as property, but that as a righteous kinsman, Ben should ensure the family name continues, too, noting that on Ben’s death the land will go to descendants of Ruth. With that word, Ben begins to back-pedal and says “Take my right of redemption yourself.” The deal is confirmed by Ben taking off his sandal and handing it to Boaz who then turns to the group and says “Today, you are witnesses” declaring his intention to redeem the land and marry Ruth. In response, “all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, ‘We are witnesses.’”

In that scene, we hear of a transaction that is offensive to our sensibilities, but reveals the enduring need for witnesses even so. The people in Bethlehem served a legal role, but also held Boaz accountable while offering a blessing. It is that kind of work that is ours to claim again.

This worship service provides us with the latest moment to do that as in a few minutes, two parents will present their two children for the Sacrament of Baptism. It is an occasion we always celebrate as a body of faith. One of the reasons that the vast majority of baptisms for Presbyterians occur in the context of public worship and not in some private ceremony is because we understand baptism to be a community event. It is the unique time for each child who receives the waters of baptism to be sure, but it is also a time that includes promises by the parents and congregation all in response to the love of God. Thus, as witnesses, both parent and

parishioner declare their part in nurturing the Christian faith in the child. It's a mutual accountability and blessing we offer as witnesses. It was that way in Bethlehem long ago, too.

For after affirming the legality of what occurred between Boaz and his kinsman, they name a collective hope for the future. They recall several women from Israel's past—Rachel, Leah, and Tamar—who furthered God's plans and pray that Ruth will have the same kind of impact. They express the hope that Boaz and she will have children and “bestow a name in Bethlehem.” That longing gets fulfilled when their descendant David is born and happens again centuries later when a child spends his first night in a manger. They were the first witnesses.

Often when the term “witnessing” is used in terms of the Christian faith it refers to sharing our story of how God has been at work in our lives. In our reading from the book of Acts we hear of when that charge was given as just prior to his return to heaven, in his final words, Jesus says to his followers “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Notice, Jesus doesn't say “you have the option to be my witnesses” or “if interested, you can be my witnesses.” Instead, he says “you will be my witnesses” which says something that we know; namely, that our actions, our words, our choices are noticed. Thus there is this kind of mutual responsibility to being a witness when we choose to follow Jesus.

A retired Presbyterian pastor named Raymond Brubaker served in Reading, Pennsylvania and in a denominational publication years ago, told of a time he encountered a good witness in his congregation. “Since the sanctuary of our church is not air-conditioned” Brubaker wrote “but is equipped with a sound system with a remote microphone, I asked the clerk of session ‘Would it be all right if I delivered the sermon from my air-conditioned study on hot Sundays? I'll put a large picture of myself in the pulpit!’ ‘That will be fine,’ the Ruling Elder replied “as long as you allow us to put our pictures in the pews!’” (*Presbyterians Today*, September 2000, p. 5)

Witnesses keep us true to our calling and we all need that gift. We all need others who ensure that we don't take the easy way out or shirk our responsibilities or fail to follow-through. In other words, just as was true near the gate of Bethlehem long ago, we need witnesses who step forward in the critical moments of our life to further God's purposes.

I'm sure that all of you are familiar with the terrifying events of six weeks ago when a Southwest Airlines flight had to make an emergency landing in Philadelphia. Shortly after take-off from New York City, one of the engines on Flight 1380 blew and shrapnel slammed into the wing, fuselage and window. Sadly, a passenger from Albuquerque died, but the whole flight was at risk due to the loss of power and cabin pressure. Fortunately for all involved, the pilot that day was Tammie Jo Shults, who kept her cool, communicating clearly with air traffic controllers and landed the disabled plane safely after it dropped 20,000 feet in six minutes. Once the plane was on the ground, she walked the aircraft to check on passengers. One, Benjamin Goldstein, asked her if he would get a hug, too. “She said, ‘Of course, I wouldn't let you by without a hug.’ It was very touching,” Goldstein said. “Here at the most crucial moment, she had the presence of mind and the courage to act with excellence as it was required...we have our lives to thank for it.”

In the days since, more of her story has been told. As a child, Shults loved to watch Air Force jets fly over her family's ranch in New Mexico and was inspired by a book called *Jungle Pilot* that told of a Christian missionary in Ecuador. Years later, she went to an aviation lecture by a retired colonel during her high school's vocation day. He started by asking her if she was lost. “I mustered up the courage to assure him I was not,” Shults recalled “and that I was interested in flying. He allowed me to stay but assured me there were no professional women

pilots. I did not say another word. In my heart, I hoped that God had given me an interest in flying for a reason... My junior year in college, I met a girl who had just received her Air Force wings. My heart jumped. Girls did fly! I set to work trying to break into the club.” When she learned that the Air Force at that time would not train her as a pilot, Schults joined the Navy. She became one of the first female fighter pilots and helped train others during Operation Desert Storm. Shults retired from the Navy in the 1990s and has flown for Southwest Airlines since.

After the dramatic landing in Philadelphia, one reporter spoke with Staci Thompson, a staff member at Tammie Jo Shults’ home church. Thompson said that Tammie Jo “would tell you everything she has she’s been given from God, so she wants to share it.” Shults concurred as in a blog she spoke of how being a pilot provided her with “the opportunity to witness for Christ on almost every flight.” (*The Wired Word*, “Pilot Who Landed Crippled Plane on One Engine Found ‘Nerves of Steel’ in Her Training and Faith,” 4/29/18 and DeSoto, Randy “Hero Southwest Pilot’s Text After Landing: ‘God is Good.’”westernjournal.com, 4/29/18)

You never know when or how we will be called to use our gifts, but our Savior did proclaim “you will be my witnesses.” Thus on this day, we accept once again our part in furthering God’s purposes. To hold persons accountable and offer our blessing. To speak the truth in love and uphold one another and accept the same gift in return. All in such a way that persons won’t need to ask “Can I get a witness?” for in us they will already have one.