

“Rising Up”  
Ruth 3:1-18

On her initial day on the job, Gertrude Jeannette, the first woman licensed to drive a cab in New York City got in an accident. She had pulled up to the Waldorf-Astoria looking for a fare, but was cut off by other taxi drivers. Jeannette, an African-American, told of what happened. “In those days,” she said “they didn’t allow black drivers to work downtown; you had to work uptown. They said, ‘Say buddy, you know you aren’t supposed to be on this line.’” As cabbies hurled insults and hemmed her in, she remained calmly on the line until a Checker cab lurched in front of her. “I rammed my fender under his fender,” she recalled “swung it over to the right and ripped it.” When the other driver got a good look at her, he screamed: “A woman driver! A woman driver!” She was later reprimanded, but drove off with her first customer. Jeannette, who was also one of the first women to get a motorcycle license in New York and who, later overcame a speech impediment to become a Broadway, film, and television actress as well as a playwright, producer and director, died last month in Harlem. She was 103.

Her obituary told of how she had grown up on a farm in Arkansas, met her future husband--35 years her senior--on prom night and eloped to New York in 1933. With the money earned driving a cab, she set out to correct a childhood stammer by enrolling in a speech class at the American Negro Theater. Acting was part of the curriculum and she studied with Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, and Ossie Davis. She began writing plays in response to an absence of authentic black characters. “I saw parts I knew that I wouldn’t play” she said “so I started writing about women, and strong women, that I knew that no one would be ashamed to play.”

When that theater closed and many African American actors moved to California, she stayed and set up a succession of theater companies over the next 40 years. Ward Nixon, artistic director at the last one described her this way: “She had many opportunities to go to Hollywood, but she always stayed in Harlem ...to make sure the community had top-notch theater. Ms. Jeannette left on this earth the feeling of hope,” Nixon said. “That wherever you are in life, and whatever you want to do, you can always rise up.” (Wolfe, Jonathan, “Gertrude Jeannette, Actor, Director and Cabdriver, Dies at 103.” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2018, p A24).

The Biblical passage before us today tells of ones who rose up, too, working against cultural norms that could have held them back. Along the way, they suggest opportunities God places before each one of us still to help others do the same.

To set the stage for those events, it’s helpful to remember that Ruth’s husband had died. Tradition suggested she stay in her homeland of Moab, but she had insisted on going with her mother-in-law Naomi back to the older woman’s community of Bethlehem. Shortly after their arrival Ruth went out to glean, pick grain left behind for the poor and widows when Boaz saw her. He took special interest in Ruth, offered protection and extra food for the two women. At the time of our reading, the harvest season has ended yet Boaz, despite his generosity and an earlier hint of romantic interest on his part, has made no further gesture. Perhaps he has been too busy with the harvest or feels that he is too old for Ruth or maybe he is simply slow in matters of the heart. We aren’t told, but in our text Naomi proposes a plan of action.

“My daughter,” Naomi says “I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well for you.” She expresses a hope that Ruth will remarry and end the economic uncertainty widows of that day faced. Naomi suggests that Ruth bathe, put on perfume and her best clothes. Then, she is to go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be winnowing the grain, tossing the beaten-out

grain into the air to remove the chaff. Ruth is to wait until Boaz falls asleep, then lie next to him and uncover his feet. After that, Naomi says, “he will tell you what to do.” Ruth agrees and acts according to plan. At midnight, Boaz awakens and is startled to see a woman at his feet. “Who are you?” he asks and the younger woman deviates from the agreed-upon script. “I am Ruth, your servant,” she says “spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.”

To understand the implication of her words, you need to know that the Hebrew noun translated as “next-of-kin” has the sense of being a “redeemer.” In ancient Jewish law, the next-of-kin had the right to purchase back or redeem a piece of land that was about to go outside of the family. They could purchase the freedom of a relative who had sold her or himself into slavery due to financial trouble, too. In addition, the phrase “spread your cloak” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to symbolize marriage. Ruth seems to be saying to Boaz “Marry me, for you are my father-in-law’s nearest relative and should redeem us from a life of poverty.”

They are bold words and must have been startling for Boaz, yet he replies “May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first.” He is praising Ruth, perhaps for selecting him over a younger man, but seemingly also for reaching out to a kinsman of Naomi’s husband and thus ensuring the older woman’s security as well. Boaz expresses a willingness to redeem and marry her if another kinsman does not. He sends Ruth home with more grain and the two women wait to see what unfolds.

In many ways it’s a confusing scene loaded with all kinds of questions about intent and action. When heard in the original language there is innuendo and a couple of euphemisms, too, about what is requested and done. Yet at its most basic level, that scene shows how life changed for all three people; when simple gestures helped each of them rise up.

You and I have had people do that for us, too, and I’d like for you to recall one person in your life who has had that kind of impact. It might be someone from your past or present, but someone who encouraged you and took a chance on you. Someone who stood up for you or spoke words that changed the course of your life. Someone who didn’t care what others expected and instead acted in ways that were bold, redemptive even. I’m going to stop talking as you identify that person.

Do you have that individual in mind? My guess is they offered some ordinary gesture or word, perhaps when it was only the two of you present. It may even be difficult to explain why their deed or presence or act proved to be so life-changing, but you know the impact. That’s what Boaz and Ruth did for each other amidst those events of long ago as they helped the other and Naomi rise up. God used those simple acts for purposes far beyond what they imagined and we are called to do that, too, trusting God can do the same for others through us.

I recently finished reading a book about Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister and beloved host of the children’s program *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Written by Tim Madigan, it tells of a deep friendship between the two men that began when he was assigned to interview the television legend. That bond endured until Rogers’ death in 2003. At one point in the book, Madigan talks of an *Esquire* magazine article about his friend written by Tom Junod. It recalled a day Fred Rogers was visiting a teenage boy who was afflicted with cerebral palsy and terrible anger. One of the boy’s few consolations in life was watching *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*.

“At first,” Junod writes “the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him. He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, he got mad at himself and began...hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room and talk to him. Mister Rogers didn’t leave...He just waited patiently, and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers talked to him, and then he made his request. He said, ‘I would like you to do

something for me. Would you do something for me?’ On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do anything for Mister Rogers... ‘I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?’ ...the boy didn’t know how to respond,” Junod says. “He was thunderstruck ...because nobody had ever asking him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed for. The boy had always been the object of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mr. Rogers, and although at first he didn’t know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he’d try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn’t talk about wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean that God likes him, too.

“As for Mister Rogers himself,” Junod continued “he doesn’t look at the story the same way the boy did or I did. In fact, when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself—and Mister Rogers responded by looking at me first with puzzlement and then with surprise. ‘Oh heavens no, Tom! I didn’t ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession.’” (Madigan, Tim in *I’m Proud of You*. North Charleston, SC: Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2012, pp. 78-9).

Simple deeds that allowed others to rise up. On this day, we give thanks for such people in this world who act in ways that transform lives, including our own. And we pray that God will yet again bring such redemptive work to others through us.