

“Signs of a Thaw”
Ruth 2:17-23/Romans 5:6-11

Years ago, I heard of an annual event in International Falls, Minnesota. That community is located on the Canadian border and often has the coldest temperatures in continental U.S. They make the best of such notoriety as each January they hold a festival called “Icebox Days.” Included in the four-day celebration are such activities as an “Ode to the Cold” poetry contest, frozen turkey bowling and a 10K race known as the “Freeze Yer Gizzard Blizzard Run.”

The event mentioned to me doesn’t occur during Icebox Days, but weeks later as in that community’s Smokey Bear Park is a 22-foot-tall thermometer. Today, it will show a high of 63 degrees, yet during the winter, consistently displays a temperature well below freezing. If you can imagine what that weather pattern can do to the psyche you understand why on the day mercury rises above 32 for the first time, there is a party. The locals know, of course, that they will face many more weeks of extreme weather, but for a moment, they celebrate signs of a thaw.

Our Old Testament account shows a thaw beginning, too, one not measured with thermometers, but the heart as it continues the story of two women living amidst uncertainty.

Naomi had set out for her homeland after the death of her husband and two sons while living in Moab. Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law, journeyed with her even though she was not invited and not from Israel. When they arrived in Bethlehem, neighbors ask “Is this Naomi?” and she said “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara”—a name that means “bitter”—“the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.”

At some point days later, Ruth sets out to glean in a nearby field. Gleaning was the practice by which the poor could help themselves to crops left after harvesting and Ruth had gone to gather grain for Naomi and herself. The owner of the field was Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi’s husband, but Ruth didn’t know it at the time. Boaz took notice of the young woman and extended his protection, shared a meal with her and urged her to pick additional grain. After she had left, Boaz told his workers to pull out some of the grain already collected and leave it for Ruth, too. After she has beaten out the grain from the stalks gathered Ruth returns home.

Naomi is stunned by the amount of grain her daughter-in-law has collected--an ephah--which would be enough to feed two people for a week. “Where did you glean today?” Naomi asks “And where have you worked?” She learns that it was Boaz who has been so gracious. Naomi voices both gratitude and blessing, and for the first time shows concern for Ruth, urging her—as had Boaz earlier that day—to stay with the women in the field. The end result is that Ruth gleans for the rest of the season, providing the two women with additional food security.

There are all kinds of faithful ways to respond to that scene, but I was struck by the change in Naomi. There is a softening in her and a thaw that begins in two key relationships. I’d like for us to ponder that aspect of the narrative not only because it is so striking, but because I suspect most of us have known of time when a chill has set in with one of our ties, too.

As an adult child announces his intention to marry someone of whom his parents do not approve and unless cooler heads prevail there can be a notable absence at the wedding. Long - time friends fall out over words spoken in anger and the two can then pass each other on the street or school hallway or breakroom in silence. A hurtful experience at church can cause someone to give up on organized religion or God or both. In all kinds of ways, human beings can get frozen in particular patterns of relating; choices that can prove costly.

In July, Commodore Ronald Warwick of the *Queen Mary 2* cruise ship will retire after a 36 year-career. As you can imagine, such a long time working on the sea offers many stories and

one from years ago occurred when he was captain of the Queen Elizabeth 2. Warwick was talking with a passenger who had paid full fare for his dog to accompany him on an around-the-world cruise. Accommodations then ranged from \$25,000 to \$150,000. “Wouldn’t it have cost less to leave him at home?” Warwick gently asked. “Oh no,” the man replied. “When we are away a long time, the dog’s psychiatrist fees are so high, it’s less expensive to bring him along.” (Leadership, Spring 1996, p. 77)

Sometimes, we get stuck into patterns that cost us dearly and not only financially. That has been the story of Naomi thus far, yet in the verses before us it begins to change.

For when Naomi realizes the field where the abundant gleaning occurred belongs to Boaz she says to Ruth “This man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” Her choice of personal pronouns is striking as Boaz is a relative of Elimelech, Naomi’s husband. It’s not clear that Jewish law or tradition then prescribed any kind of obligation from Boaz toward his kinsman’s widow and daughter-in-law, yet Naomi says to Ruth, “[he] is one of *our* nearest kin.”

Likewise there is a thaw in Naomi’s bond with God. On arriving in Bethlehem she had berated her Creator for what had occurred in Moab, a response that isn’t unusual after a particularly painful loss. Still today, persons can wonder about God’s care when life grows tough or disappointing or hurtful. Upon her return home Naomi had given voice to words that countless others have felt and perhaps been afraid to name, yet on hearing of Boaz’ generosity, she says “Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” It’s not clear if she is speaking of the kindness of God or Boaz, but the fact there is uncertainty is a sign of progress in Naomi as she is being reconciled to God and to Ruth. It all began on that day.

Our New Testament reading celebrates that gift for all believers. As part of his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul declares “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” The Apostle speaks of that incredible gift as the basis for our being justified--made right--with God and then goes on. “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” Thus while not using the same metaphor, Paul speaks of how a thaw with eternal consequences occurred between God and us.

Naomi lived centuries before Jesus, but there were signs of a thaw for her, too, when she learned of the generosity of Boaz. It will prove to be the turning point of the narrative, as from this moment forward, she partners with Ruth in a way that will change the future for both women. It started when Naomi allowed it to begin.

That can be the key obstacle for you and me, too, as if there is to be a thaw, if there is to be new life in relationships that have become strained or put on hold or severed, it often can come about only if we permit it. When we allow our own sense of hurt to end and we reach out to God or to the people in our lives with whom the bond has become frayed.

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not suggesting all relationships should be mended. When there has been abuse or violence in any form, when there are incompatible differences in values or priorities ending a relationship is appropriate. Yet Naomi embodies those other times when we needlessly cut ourselves off from the very ones who are capable of bringing joy to our days. In such occasions, if there is to be a change, if there is to be a thaw, it often starts with us.

I once read of a cemetery caretaker who received a check each month from a woman confined to a hospital. The funds were for fresh flowers for the grave of the woman’s son who had died in an automobile accident several years before.

One day, a car drove into the cemetery and stopped in front of the caretaker's building. In the back seat sat an older woman pale, her eyes half-closed. "She is too ill to walk," the driver said. "Would you mind coming with us to her son's grave—she has a favor to ask of you?" "Is this Mrs. Wilson?" The driver nodded. The caretaker got in beside the woman. "Every month for the past two years" she whispered. "I know," he said. "I have attended to it, just as you asked." "I have come here today," she went on "because doctors tell me I have only a few weeks left. I will not be sorry to go. There is nothing left to live for. But before I die I wanted to come here for one last look and to make arrangements with you to keep on placing the flowers on my son's grave."

The car made its way to the site. The woman, with great effort, raised herself slightly and gazed out. There was no sound until the caretaker spoke. "You know, Ma'am, I was always sorry you kept sending money for the flowers." "Sorry? Do you realize what you are saying—my son..." "Yes, I know, but you see, I belong to a church group that every week visits hospitals, prisons, juvenile facilities. There are live people in those places who need cheering up, and most of them love flowers... That grave over there, there's...no one to see and smell the beauty of the flowers." The woman did not answer, but kept staring ahead. After a lengthy silence, she lifted her hand and the man drove them back to the caretaker's building. He got out and without a word they drove off. "I've offended her," he thought to himself. "I shouldn't have said what I did."

Some months later, he was surprised to have another visit from the woman. This time she was driving the car herself. The caretaker could hardly believe his eyes. "You were right," she told him, "about the flowers. That's why there have been no more checks. After I got back, I couldn't get your words out of my mind. So I started buying flowers for the others in the hospital who didn't have any. It gave me such a feeling of joy to see how much they enjoyed them—and from a total stranger. It made them happy, but more than that, it made me happy. The doctors don't know what is suddenly making me well, but I do." (*Bits 'n Pieces @1988*)

Naomi began to get well when she recognized how God was working in her life through Boaz and Ruth. She began to get better when she chose to start the process of being reconciled to her daughter-in-law and to her Maker. It would need time, yet it was a start.

Perhaps that's all we can do on this day, too, to start mending ties that might yet bring joy. We can count on fact that God has already done the hard work of ensuring that he and we will be forever reconciled and if we seek a restored bond there need only to ask. Improving the ties with other? Maybe all that is holding that back is our willingness to begin.