

“A Future of Hope”
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17
The Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore
San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ
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Last Sunday we left the story of Ruth at the point when Ruth declares her oath to stay with Naomi and place her future (for better or for worse) with her mother-in-law. So the two women head back to Naomi's home in Bethlehem of Judah (remember that) not knowing what their future would bring, and their future welfare was very tenuous since back then women needed men in order to survive. (They still come in handy! But back then they were necessary.)

Last week I mentioned that the details are very important in this story. One of those important details is that they arrived home at the time of the barley harvest. So, Ruth asks permission to go to the fields and like other poor folk, to follow after the reapers and pick up whatever they have left or dropped. This was a way the poor were cared for. Ruth works from morning until night gathering grain so that she and Naomi can eat.

Now, a relative of Naomi whose name was Boaz, owned the field where Ruth gathered grain. After finding out that Ruth was the young woman who devotedly cared for her mother-in-law and knowing that as a foreign woman, she was vulnerable, he called her over and told her to stay close to his young women servants. And he gives her this blessing: “May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” Naomi is worried about Ruth in the years ahead, and she plots a way for her to secure a future of hope. It was the law in ancient Israel that when a man died and left a wife, the duty of his brother or kinsman was to marry her and bear children in the dead man's name. So Naomi suggests subtle actions that Ruth might employ in order to become Boaz's wife.

Ruth goes into Boaz who is asleep on the threshing floor and when he awakes surprised and startled, she employs him to “spread your wing over your servant.” This is an ancient marriage proposal and echoes the blessing Boaz earlier gave to Ruth when he said: “under God's wings you have come for refuge.” Ruth becomes Boaz's wife and thus not only is has a future of hope but ensures the welfare of Naomi for the remainder of her life. And the story doesn't end there. Ruth bears a son named Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David. Because Ruth knew how to love and how to be in relationship with her mother-in-law and with people of a foreign land, she, even as a foreigner, becomes the great-grandmother of King David from whose lineage and in the town of Bethlehem Jesus the Christ is born. Her future of hope ultimately becomes our future of hope.

A word that is repeated in three crucial places within this very short book is the word “hesed” often translated as “kindness” or “steadfast love.” But hesed is more than just being kind. Hesed is a love that brings life! It is a love that makes for a future of hope. It is God's hesed gives us hope. Though we like to think that we are secure and self-sufficient, it only takes a wildfire, or an illness, or a threat of terror to remind us that our hope is in God; we are not able to secure our future on our own, much as we would like to do so. Our hope is bound up with our devotion to God and our commitment to the community.

Over the history of this community great hesed, great kindness and steadfast love has been shown generation after generation. It has provided for this little church a future of hope through thick and thin, good times and bad. I was reminded of this on Friday when I opened the church mail. In it was a check for interest on an endowment established by Walker Downs many years ago. I never knew him but his presence shows up all over this place. He must have loved SDCC, UCC because his actions have helped to secure for us, a future of hope. Today we are the inheritors of those who have gone before us and made possible a future of hope. We are also children of God and it is God in whom all futures find their hope.

On this stewardship Sunday when we meditate on what we will pledge ourselves to give to this church in 2007, it is our opportunity to provide for a future of hope. I have found this little church to be enormously generous, filled with love, and motivated from a depth of integrity that has

sustained it over the years and enabled it to be a blessing of hope for many people past and present.

And because I believe that San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ will extend this same hope into the future, it is with joy and gratitude that I serve in this time and place. Tom and I pledge ourselves to you and to a future of hope because we know you to be faithful not only to each other but faithful to the God in whom we believe and trust. And so it is easy for Tom and I to say: "Where you go, we want to go. Where you dwell; we will dwell. Your people shall be our people, and your God our God."

In anticipation of Thanksgiving Sunday when we return our pledge cards, let us prayerfully commit ourselves to give all that we can, to give all that we are, to pledge all that we may be, to providing a future of hope for the hopeless; a future of hesed, steadfast love, for a world that is desperately waiting to hear the old, old story of God's love, a love that knows no beginning and no end. AMEN