

“Happily Ever After”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Naomi [, the mother-in-law of Ruth,] said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” ⁵She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

¹³So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

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So, David finally got engaged, and was excited to introduce his new bride-to-be to the family. “Ma,” he said to his mother, “I’m going to bring home three girls and I want you to guess which one is my fiancé.” Sure enough,

twenty minutes later David walked through the door with three women. “It’s that one,” said his mother, without blinking an eye. “Holy cow!” exclaimed David, “How in the world did you know it was her?” His mother replied, “I just don’t like her.”

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Many of you will remember that last week we began the story of the Bible’s most famous mother-in-law/daughter-in-law duo, Naomi and Ruth. While mother-in-law jokes are a staple in any comedian’s repertoire, Ruth and Naomi’s bond was no laughing matter and, on this All Saints Sunday, is worth our special consideration. Today’s reading from the book of Ruth skips over some pretty important plot details so I’ll begin with a summary of their story.

Years earlier, Naomi had moved with her family from Israel to the land of Moab (a bitter enemy of Israel) in order to escape famine. They put down roots and their sons married local women. The family’s fortunes changed when all of the men died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Seeing no future for herself in Moab, Naomi decided to return to Israel, to her kin in Bethlehem. Orpah returned to her family in Moab, but Ruth determined to follow Naomi, leaving her family, her religion, and her homeland behind.

Unable to own property or make a living as women, Ruth gleaned in the fields during harvest to gather the grain left behind by the reapers. As fate would have it, the field she was gleaning belonged to Boaz, a distant relative of her deceased husband’s family and an all-around good guy. Boaz took note of the foreigner in his fields and made special provisions to ensure that she would go home with plenty of food for herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi.

After a couple of months, Naomi decided that it was time for Ruth to make her move and secure a comfortable future for both of them. Ruth washed up, put on her best clothes, and went to Boaz as he slept on the threshing

floor where he'd been winnowing barley. When Boaz awoke, Ruth pretty much proposed to him. Impressed by her as a person and especially by her loyalty to her mother-in-law, Boaz agreed to Ruth's proposal. A short time later, the two were wed and eventually had a child—Obed who would become grandfather to Israel's greatest king—David. And they all lived happily ever after.

I love happily-ever-afters, don't you? The truth is, though, more than being just another story with a happy ending, the story of Naomi and Ruth is one of the great courage of two women – their tenacity, grit, wit, and dedication to one another. It's a story of struggle – Naomi and Ruth's struggle to make their own way and write their own story in a time when every aspect of a woman's life was orchestrated by men; the struggle of grieving widows over the deaths of husbands; the struggle of immigrants to make a new life for themselves in an inhospitable new land; the struggle of the economically disadvantaged against a social system destined to make them fail; the struggle of family-less people to gather around themselves a network of love, support, and mutuality; the struggle of every person for security, community, dignity, and self-worth.

Everyone loves a happily-ever-after, but our story, New England's story, like Ruth and Naomi's, consists of so much more than a happy ending—than the living and loving and thriving church of today. It's a story of a little band of worshippers that gathered above the Phillips Brothers Grocery Store beginning in 1858; of the struggle to raise \$1000 for the first building and the brave decision of the Clark family to mortgage their home to raise the last \$100; of pew rentals paying bills and taking up the mantle of abolition and women's suffrage; of stretching into a new building in 1890 and then moving forward in faith with renovations during the Great Depression. It's a story of steady growth in the 40s and 50s and the decline of the 70s; of the emergence of a heightened social consciousness in the 80s, congregational rebirth in the late 80s and 90s, and significant renovations to the building in the first decade of the 2000s. Sure, ours is a story with a beginning and, 163 years later, the living and loving and thriving church we are a part of today—our happily-ever-after.

But it's also a story where most of the action, most of what really matters, happens in the middle.

Everyone loves a happily-ever-after, but Naomi and Ruth's story, our story, is about so much more than its conclusion. It's about struggle, loss, pain, relationships, commitment, hard work, family, community, joy, faith. It's about life—about how it's lived and who it's lived with. When you think about it, isn't that what all good stories are really about—all the parts between the beginning and the end, between “once upon a time” and “happily ever after?”

Friends, that's what all good lives are about too. They're about all the parts between the beginning and the end. We're all born and we all die—it's how we live in between that matters. On this All Saints Sunday, may we be inspired by the story of Naomi and Ruth. May we be inspired by the lives of the faithful people who founded and sustained, struggled and pushed, nurtured and loved this church, to this day. May we learn to live between beginning and end, between “once upon a time” and “happily ever after.” And may we all love and live well. Amen.