

“Act As If....”

A Sermon on Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Nancy Raca, Covenant UMC, November 8, 2015

Have you ever heard the expression, “fake it til you make it?” This has always been a favorite saying of my mother’s. If you want to get ahead, you’ve got to fake it til you make it.

My mom, you see, graduated from college in the early 1960s, a time when only 7 percent of women had 4-year college degree. That was a time when, if you wanted to work in a man’s world, you had to dress, and talk, and act like you belonged there. You had to act “as if” ...as if you had just as much right to be there as anyone else, as if you were as competent as anyone ever was, as if you were destined to rise to prominence.

There’s something to be said for it. A lot can be accomplished by acting “as if.”

Want a job at the trendiest store in the mall? Act as if you belong there, wearing their clothes, representing their brand.

Want to train your dog to do what you say? Act as if you are the leader of his pack.

Want to win that soccer game? Act as if you’re the best team in the league.

Want to be the spiritual center, the church, for the neighborhood? Act as if you already are – engage the neighbors, invite them in, minister to their needs.

Act as if you are already who you want to be.

Today's story from the Book of Ruth is a story about acting "as if" ...

But first, since our lectionary drops us down right in the middle of the story, a little background:

In this book, Ruth, a woman from a country called Moab, and her mother-in-law, Naomi, an Israelite, are in a tough spot. All the men in their family are dead: Naomi's husband, as well as her two sons, one of whom had been married to Ruth, are gone.

So Naomi and Ruth have journeyed from Moab to Judah to start over, but they don't have many prospects. They're really on their own. In those days, a woman without the protection of a man, whether a husband or a father or a brother, was in big trouble. She would have had few respectable ways to make a living, and no one to advocate for her or ensure that she got fair treatment.

Naomi, knowing all this, had urged Ruth to stay in Moab, with her birth family, but Ruth wouldn't do it. Ruth *gave her loyalty* to Naomi -- and to Naomi's God -- and went with her into an unknown but frightening future in Judah.

In this challenging environment – with no protection and no income – Ruth ends up putting food on the table by gleaning barley in the fields of a man named Boaz. That means that she walks behind the reapers in the fields and basically picks up whatever they drop or leave behind. It's a tough way to get something to eat, but at least it allows Ruth and Naomi to survive.

Eventually, Naomi hatches a plan to improve their circumstances, and that's where we join today's Scripture passage.

"Maybe it's time we found you a husband," Naomi says to Ruth. "Why don't you go ahead and clean yourself up, put on some nice clothes and perfume, and go down to where Boaz is working? When he goes to bed, go lie down next to him and uncover his feet." Hm.

To call Naomi a matchmaker here is, in my opinion, a kind description. I can think of, well, some other words that might better describe what Ruth's mother-in-law is doing here. But let's give her the benefit of the doubt and assume that Naomi has Ruth's best interests at heart.

The text doesn't tell us exactly what Ruth thinks of this arrangement. If it were me, I would not react well: *"I've left my homeland and my family to follow you into poverty, I've worked in the fields day after day to put food on our table, and now you want me to put myself in a compromising situation with a guy I barely know in the hopes that he might take me as his wife? Excuse me??"*

But Ruth is not me, and I – thank God – am not Ruth. In this context, and in the context of all too many people even today, Ruth is left with very little choice. So Ruth simply says, "All that you have told me I will do."

Ruth is willing to take a risk. A *big* risk.

And in doing so, she goes all in. Ruth doesn't go in timidly. She doesn't wait for Boaz to "tell her what to do" as Naomi says he will. Knowing that she needs to come out of this situation as Boaz's wife, Ruth acts as if it's a foregone conclusion.

And it works!

And this is where we *do* have the choice to be like Ruth:

We all face situations that are hard.

We all have opportunities to take risks.

We all have the choice to act "as if" ... as if our fear won't stop us, as if we don't care what other people think, as if we *will* succeed, because we *have to*.

Like Ruth, we are all vulnerable, yet we can all be resilient and courageous.

Like when we decide in our mid-40s (as at least one of us has done) to quit our jobs and become a pastor. Or when we sign up for a marathon even though we've never

run as much as a mile. Or when we apply for a job that we're just barely qualified for. Or... when we invest in a 100-year-old church building even though we're not sure what the future holds.

So where is God in all this?

One of the interesting things about the Book of Ruth is that God isn't a main character. We don't see God acting directly in this book.

But I believe that, in this story, God acts through Ruth, and through Ruth's relationship with Naomi.

The trust that Ruth has in Naomi, and that Ruth apparently has *in herself* to make things happen is a trust that is founded on God. And that trust pays off.

Ruth the Moabite – the outsider – marries Boaz, and bears a son. And that son becomes the grandfather of King David, the root of the family tree that begets Jesus.

Jesus Christ, God incarnate, descends from an inconsequential outsider, a woman of little means, a woman whose only assets are her faith in her mother-in-law, in God, and in herself.

Look what Ruth accomplishes because she took a risk. Look what happens because instead of living in fear and shame, Ruth steps out in faith.

Ruth wasn't made for fear. *We* weren't made for fear. We were made for faith, for trust in the God who provides, who makes a way in the desert. We were made to act as if...as if we have *already* inherited the blessings God has for us, as if we are God's beloved children, God's chosen people. We were made to act as if God came to earth in the form of Jesus Christ to save us from ourselves. Because God did. Because we are God's children.

So even when the trials of this world seem too much to handle, too hard to overcome, we can step out in faith, knowing that blessings await us. We can act as if we've got it covered, because God *does*.

Think what you could do in your life, if you acted *as if*...

Think what we could do as a church, together, if instead of living in fear of the future and the poverty of now, we lived in the fullness of God's promise.

Today we are asking you to turn in your financial commitment not only for the operating budget of the church but also for the capital campaign that will allow us to use this building to serve more people for generations to come. How quickly would we meet our goal, if each of us acted as if committing to being the church in this place were God's call for us, God's blessing for our community.

I know how hard it is to stretch to put our best gift forward today. I know the fear that comes from uncertainty about the future. I know the fear of failure.

But Ruth knew that fear as well, and she didn't let it stop her. Ruth acted as if God had already provided everything she needed for now and for the future, knowing that her trust in God and Naomi and herself would see her through.

Think what *you* could do if you set aside your fear, and acted *as if*...