

## Carpe diem and God

Sermon by John Strommen on Ruth 3:1-18 August 5, 2018

In the movie, "Dead Poet's Society," the teacher played by Robin Williams defines the Latin term, "Carpe diem." Have you forgotten what that phrase means? OK, listen and watch, as the teacher instructs his students. It is an appropriate intro for today.

(film clip)

Seize the day. Make something happen in life. Don't be passive. Dare to be great, even.

Or there's this similar adage: "The early bird gets the worm," which is too bad for me because I'm not an early bird. The meaning is don't wait around for others to get to what might be coming to you if you are proactive and get up early. Sort of "carpe diem" in regular time.

And while the meaning in Dead Poet's Society is defined without reference to God, it is enriched when God is a player in this scenario, because we're not just defiantly creating meaning for ourselves in a bleak universe. And so you get an adage like this: "God helps those who help themselves." This is misleading in many ways, but it has a grain of truth, too. It's a lot easier for God to help us, the reasoning goes, when we are proactive, join the cause and use our gifts. So take initiative!

The Gospel lesson really gives voice to this idea when Jesus invites us to "ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you."

This is what the third chapter of Ruth is about: "carpe diem." Ask, seek, knock. "God helps those who help themselves." Call it bold - call it even inappropriate - it worked. You may recall that Naomi, once a mother to two sons is now a childless widow. One of her son's wives, Ruth, now a widow herself, chose to stay with her mother-in-law come hades or high water. One problem for both of them: Ruth was a Moabite, a despised neighbor. Now in Israel, Ruth had found favor and protection working in the fields of the wealthy farmer Boaz, himself a relative of Naomi. But Ruth was vulnerable. She was an immigrant (and we know how vulnerable immigrants can be) and unmarried with no children to care for her in her old age. Naomi also lacked social security in a land with no safety nets for the elderly.

So, at Naomi's behest, we learn today that Ruth finds a husband, a future, and security in one visit to the barley threshing floor. And Naomi may have found security as well. Naomi instructed Ruth thusly: tonight Boaz will be winnowing the barley, sorting the barely from the chaff, at the threshing floor. Wash and anoint yourself, put on your best clothes, and go to the threshing floor. Don't reveal yourself right away, but wait until after Boaz is done winnowing, has eaten and drank his fill, and lied down to sleep on the threshing floor. Then, Naomi instructed Ruth, go over to him, uncover his feet and lie down next to him. Then Boaz will tell you what to do next. Uncover his feet? More on that later.

This is an obvious ploy for Ruth to get a husband and for her and her deceased family to be "redeemed," which is why they keep talking about next of kin in this story. To be redeemed is something that meant a lot in this culture, as social standing and security was all about family connections.

So Ruth did as she was told, and when Boaz found a place on top of the grain to lie down and go to sleep, soon Ruth was lying down next to him. At midnight, Boaz woke up and was startled to notice a woman lying at his feet. “Who are you?” he asked. “I am Ruth, your servant.” And then, instead of taking Naomi’s advice to wait for Boaz’ lead to tell her what to do, Ruth took control of the situation, “carpe diem” style! Ruth said, “Spread your cloak over your servant for you are next of kin.” Spreading your cloak was a symbolic gesture that meant marriage. So she is proposing to him! As next of kin, she is also asking to be redeemed, her and her entire deceased family.

Well, Boaz is pretty impressed, and he agrees right away to marry her, noting her loyalty to Naomi and to their whole family of which Boaz was a part. And he also notes that Ruth, as a younger woman, did not go after younger men as she could have, but instead chose Boaz. I think it’s pretty clear he is pleased with this situation. On the matter of redemption, he suggests that he was not next of kin and must check with another kinsman who is next of kin. He would, however marry her. And he then asked her to stay until the morning. Ruth left in the morning before anyone knew she was there, as it was inappropriate in this culture for her to be there in the first place.

Now, there are some interesting, less innocent, nuances in this story. One can’t help but wonder, “Was there a bit more that happened that night between them that they’re not saying?” The whole lying down next to each other, uncovering feet and all?

Now, since this is a family event, I will be as obtuse as possible, but the truth is, this story is clearly told with all kinds of sly, suggestive references and double-entendres, especially for the original audience that would have heard this story spoken orally. Why talk about this in a sermon? Well, the story becomes more playful, more embodied and more real, perhaps. And God has pitched a tent in the real world, where we live.

First of all, the original listeners would have understood that the uncovering of feet was also a euphemism for something else. Then again, maybe it’s just about feet?

Second, a threshing floor was also code for other, more carnal uses, besides winnowing barley.

Third, Ruth’s instructions to Boaz to spread his cloak also had another meaning beside marriage - something much more immediate. And of course, just as in our language, lying with someone had double meanings then, too.

Exactly how much happened that night? We don’t know.

Either way – PG or NC17 - this story is scandalous, because even if we take the more innocent interpretation here, it was still wildly inappropriate for Ruth to lie down next to a man who was not her husband in a public place. This is why she had to leave secretly in the morning.

So if one is a legalist here, we might say that Naomi’s scheming and Ruth’s bold behavior should not be rewarded at all. And yet, Ruth now has a husband and the promise of redemption for her family. Boaz has a wife and a connection to the lineage of Elimelech. And they all lived happily ever after? You’ll have

to come back next week to find out. Suffice it to say that Ruth and Boaz are the great great grandparents of King David, whose lineage also leads to whom? Jesus!

But let's be clear about one thing: the Bible is full of characters, even heroes, who are far less than pure. And yet God works through them, particularly when they are doing something that is helpful and a blessing for others. That seems to be the case in this story. And while we might be tempted to think God is nowhere to be seen in this story – God's not mentioned, plus it seems a little bawdy - there is a strong suggestion in chapter 3 that the hand of God is at work here.

For instance, the term we read about in this story, "spreading your cloak," has yet another fascinating nuance. It is also used in the previous chapter. In verse 12, Boaz assures Ruth that God, "under whose wings you have come for refuge," will look after her on account of her faithfulness, and give her a reward. Translated as "under his wing," it's actually the same Hebrew word as "spreading your cloak over someone," which, as we've discussed, meant marriage and other variations.

So, in this story, and in life, might it be the case that they are one and the same. When Boaz spread his cloak for Ruth, offering her marriage, security and a future, this was a good thing for both of them. Surely, as Martin Luther reminds us, God is at work in any and all things that bring life and blessing to people's lives. Luther used the term, "in, with and under," to describe how God is at work in people, especially baptized believers. God does look after us through the actions of others, and God does look after others through the actions of you! This was a core teaching that we discussed in detail in the GPS course last spring.

And so, the biblical version of "carpe diem" focuses less on seizing the moment in order to secure your own greatness or reputation, and focuses more on the purpose of experiencing God's blessings for you and blessings your neighbor through you. *Carpe diem* for the follower of Christ means, step up, use what you have to participate in the life of God!

That being the case, each and every one of us ought to be alert to the ways that God blesses us and cares for those around us *through you!* Amen.