

“Running On Empty, Arriving On Full”

Ruth 1:1-21, 2 Timothy 2:1-13, Luke 17:11-19

Proper 23-C, October 9, 2016

“Running on empty” is a phrase that many of us are familiar with! Why? Because it’s an apt description of a personal realization we drivers may come to when suddenly it dawns on us that we have been driving down an Interstate Highway on a long trip; may for 5 or 6, hours—and have not stopped to gas up our cars in a long time. When we finally muster up the needed courage to look down on the dashboard, realize that there is only about 1/8 of a tank of fuel in our car—we call that: “Running on empty!”

There are others, however, when we may use that phrase “running on empty” to speak about ourselves. It usually happens when we are living through some type of personal crisis. Something of a serious nature has happened—and so we haven’t had a full night’s sleep or eaten a decent meal in days. Our bodies are feeling the tiredness and exhaustion. At moments like this we say that we are “running on empty.”

Brothers and sisters, in this well-loved Bible story found in our Old Testament Lesson (Ruth 1:1-21) today, a widow named Naomi has been “running on empty” for quite some time, now too. First, there was a famine that forced Naomi, together with her husband Elimelech and their two young sons—named Mahlon and Chilion—to flee their homeland of Bethlehem in Judah—a suburb of Jerusalem only some 4.4 miles away!

In an attempt to stay alive, Naomi and her family have now migrated to a distant land called Moab; that part of the Middle East today that we know as the country of Jordan!

But wouldn’t you know it—for reasons unknown to us---after the family has settled in Moab, a pretty unwelcome disaster strikes Naomi’s home. Elimelech, her husband, dies suddenly. Far from home, Naomi buries her husband Elimelech, and sometime later both of her now grown sons who have married Moabite women—one daughter-in-law named Orpah and one daughter-in-law named Ruth—both of which seem to be extremely devoted to Naomi, their mother-in-law whom they love and her general welfare!

The day comes when Naomi certainly finds herself experiencing some type of unthinkable agony, suffering with an unmanageable amount of grief!

So let’s just picture this widow now covered from head to foot in the customary traditional black mourning dress, living in that time and culture that she no doubt wore for at least a year as she is making that long journey back home!

As she arrives unexpectedly at the city gate, she may have been surprised to be encountered by a number of her old friends and family members who far from forgetting here, still remember her! This is when Naomi says, “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” (v. 21)!

This is a woman who has been running on empty for a long, long time. One funeral right after another she attended without any of her old family members or friends, present there with her in that foreign country, to comfort her in any way! After a long journey across river and desert, she who went away full—meaning with a husband and two sons—now believes that she is coming home empty!

So bitter is this woman that immediately upon her arrival at the city gate, she announces a name change for herself. She told everybody present, “No longer call me ‘Naomi,’ which means “sweet,” but from now on call me ‘Mara,’ which means “bitter.”

And certainly Naomi had enough grounds to be bitter—but all throughout this time she has by no means been alone; not physically alone on her journey home and not emotionally alone either. All the way across that hot, barren landscape, her faithfully loving and loyal daughter-in-law Ruth has matched Naomi step-for-tired step.

Besides this, Ruth has grounds to be embittered too. After a childless marriage, Ruth's husband is dead. Dead, too, are her brother-in-law and father-in-law and these are the two men who under the sacred requirements of some Old Testament Mosaic laws—would have been required to provide for her support as a young widow.

Out of her great love for her mother-in-law, Ruth, however has made one of the most remarkable pledges of loyalty ever found anywhere on record.

I am sure you must have also heard these Bible verses read at weddings, even in their original context, these words were not used by a couple getting married, but spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. Even though Naomi had tried to do the loving thing and convince both of her daughters-in-law to stay behind in their own country and remarry, both girls initially protest to Naomi, directly indicating that they have no desire whatsoever to do that.

Yes, at Naomi's insistence, Orpah the other daughter-in-law, finally relinquishes and continues to reside in Moab. But not Ruth!

You heard those beautiful words of Ruth that were read in our Old Testament lesson today: "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me, from you!" Then the writer tells us: "And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more" (Vv. 16-18)!

In saying these very things, Ruth the woman from Moab is indicating publicly that she has in fact become an Old Testament believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! By word and by deed, Ruth demonstrates how much her God now means to her when he says, "I will never leave you or forsake you."

But old Naomi can't see it. She's too bitter, too wrapped up in her own inconsolable grief. Arriving home in Bethlehem, even with loyal Ruth at her side, Naomi announces, "I went away full, but now the Lord has brought me back empty" (v. 21)!

I wonder how Ruth might have felt about that statement. There she stands side-by-side with Naomi at the city gate, having left her homeland, her family and friends, her own religious tradition, having faithfully accompanied Naomi across the desert. And now Ruth doesn't get so much as an introduction. "I went away full," Naomi says, "but the Lord has brought me back empty."

And so, at this point in our retelling of Ruth's story, don't we all want to scream out loud in unison together: "Not true, Naomi, God has not brought you back empty, not by a proverbial long shot! God has provided your daughter-in-law Ruth as your faithful, loyal, and resourceful companion and God is not through providing for you. Not yet."

Brothers and sisters, you probably know by now that on any given Sunday the Old Testament lesson and our Gospel lesson were both chosen by the designers of our Church lectionary to speak to the same theme. And while you may not realize, these two portions of Scripture are actually connected on several very important levels. But the one level I am hoping we still might speak about today—is the presence or the absence of true "GRATITUDE" in a believer's life!

I don't believe that Naomi had forsaken her personal faith in God's guidance and direction because she went through some very harrowing and challenging times. She most definitely was a woman of faith. She was not a selfish, self-centered woman—not by a long shot if she is directing her dear daughter-in-law's to put their own needs, initially first, above her own.

She must have been one of those very special daughters-in-law that some women in this congregation must have had with their own mothers-in-law or with their present daughters-in-laws today!

It is harvest time in the story of Ruth, and by no small coincidence, it is harvest time here in America. Thanksgiving will soon be upon us. You may have been dreading the holidays, wondering after all you've been through this year--all of the stress, the hurts, the disappointments, the loneliness--wondering if you'll be able to endure the annual celebrations. Well, faithful listener, you may have more fuel in your tank than you think. You may even have enough to make it home, to make it through the coming holidays; home in time for a new beginning. For through Holy Scripture, God calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen.

Holidays are not a time to dread but a time to once again express gratitude to those special people through whom God's love has been made known and brought near to us.

Not unlike you or me at times, Naomi's oversight in failing to acknowledge the devotion and support of her family and friends, can happen to us quite easily too.

Speaking of which, let me say a final word about the leading man in this story. Boaz is repeatedly referred to in the story of Ruth by the Hebrew word "go'el." The word is difficult to translate from the ancient language, but it means something like Provider, Rescuer, or Sponsor. The custom in antiquity called for the nearest male kin to serve as "go'el" for the widow who had lost her husband.

Boaz steps forward to serve this role for Ruth and Naomi.

Similarly, God has provided you and me with a "go'el," someone to serve as God's chief representatives in our lives through difficult times, a strong shoulder to cry on, a partner with whom to pray, and now a friend with whom to look for a new beginning.

You went away full, but you have not come back empty. You, too, have a redeemer. Christ Jesus, our Lord, as Ruth stands beside Naomi, so does the risen Christ in the form of the church, stand beside you.

Sometimes we hear that wonderful story in the Gospel lesson today, we may easily pronounce our own judgment upon those 9 lepers who received Jesus' healing but never returned to give him thanks! Some people say: "It's not like a little "Thank You" would have killed them. It wouldn't even have taken up all that much of their precious time. All they had to do was turn around, make a quick jog back to Jesus, and give a little wave from the distance; a shout of, "Thanks for the healing" and they'd have been back on their merry way, the requirements of polite society all nicely filled. What would have been the big deal?

It's not that these other nine lepers didn't have any faith. Obviously they had faith, that's why they called out to Jesus, believing that he could heal them. They made tracks to go and show themselves to the priests even though they didn't look or feel any different when they started walking.

They trusted. They acted on faith. And they were healed. So what was it they did that was so wrong?

What made them really different from the one who remembered to say, "Thank you"? All ten lepers were healed as they were walking away from Jesus. Nine of them kept walking. But one of them found that he couldn't leave. His life had changed. Jesus gave him his life back. Jesus restored his skin and probably also his job, his family, and his place in the world. He had to go back to Jesus. He had to return and give thanks. He just had to. He couldn't keep away. That's what faith is. Faith is being unable to stay away from Jesus. To have faith in Jesus is to be in love with Jesus.

Jesus loves you no matter what. Jesus heals you, he puts your life back together, makes you whole again with a whole life again, no matter what. Jesus died and rose. That's the plain and simple truth. Jesus calls us to be his people, his children, by baptism into his death and into his resurrection. That's the way it works. Faithful life does not ignore those truths. But Christianity is not just a bored nod of the head blandly acknowledging what Jesus has done for us.

To be made well, to live well, is to always stay by Jesus. Christian life is a constant returning in praise and in thanks, in humility and in service, in gentleness and in mercy, to the Lord who has saved you, has healed you, and has made you whole. Healing and forgiveness always take us back to Jesus. Hope always takes us back to Jesus. Faith always takes us back to Jesus. It's not because it's polite to go back and say, "Thank you." It's because you're in love and you can't stay away. Amen.