

In the Quaker tradition to get married requires very little in terms of pomp and circumstance. In some instances there doesn't even have to be an officiant of any kind - religious or civil. Just the couple, two witnesses, and a piece of paper they all sign attesting to the vows made that day. In other instances, even when an officiant is present and a more traditional license is expected to be signed, the couple often chooses to have a document, sometimes artistically embellished, available for those attending to sign as a token of participation in and remembrance of the couple's decision to be wed.

This tradition has extended, as many do, beyond its origins. Many non-Quakers have these documents at their wedding ceremonies for their friends and families to sign. Elizabeth and I had one at ours. It's filled with the signatures of all our friends and family who were there. It means more to us than the license signed by the Justice of the Peace.

What's most beautiful about the Quaker marriage requirements, to me, is that everyone who is there for the occasion participates in sealing of the bond between the couple. It's not simply a rite performed by a priest or pastor or even a judge. It's not an event or a performance for a room full of people. It's the beginning of a life together for two people, witnessed and attested to by the ones whom they love.

At the end of the day all that's required in the Quaker tradition is a blessing from the gathered community and a document to mark the occasion.

Here at the end of our scripture's story about the time between the Judges of old and the Kings to come, Boaz and Ruth find their lives coming together, their union beginning, without the pomp and circumstance of a traditional wedding ceremony you or I might think of having, but with a group of elders and witnesses at the city gate and a sandal to mark the matter. A little more than Quaker wedding, maybe. A little less too. But nevertheless a union, albeit incredibly transactional, between two people who are clearly meant to be together and who see a bright future ahead of them.

And they're not the only ones.

Those gathered at the gate see that there's something more going on than a legal transaction. What Boaz is doing is more than redeeming some land and family name and there's more to what Ruth has been doing than working hard in the fields and becoming Boaz's wife.

And so for them there's more to sealing this transaction than a sandal. This isn't just another arrangement. This is a marriage. And some words must accompany what they have all witnessed that day and all they've seen from Boaz and Ruth in the days leading up to now.

Words always seem to flow out of us in these moments where we see something special happening right before our eyes. We can't keep quiet. We need to say something even if it's a simple "Yes!" to let them know we see it too. (Wagner bike story)

Whenever I preside at wedding ceremony, I encourage the couple to incorporate a few blessings into the liturgy as a chance for those who've gathered with them to fill this need to collectively say something out loud and for the couple to hear from those who've come from however far they've travelled why it is that they are there that day and why they'll be there for them for all their days to come.

During the ceremony, I invite the couple to look out at everyone who's there with them as I remind their family and friends that they form a community of support that surrounds the couple. That each of them, by their presence is being called upon to uphold them in loving each other always standing beside them, never between them offering them love and support, not judgment. To encourage them when encouragement is needed and listen to them when they ask for advice. I ask them if they offer their love and support to strengthen the marriage and bless this family created by their union.

It's a beautiful moment to watch. All these people who want to share in the joy of a new beginning getting the chance to put that in to words.

It's just as beautiful to read, and to imagine Ruth and Boaz hearing, what the elders and others gathered there at the gate in Bethlehem say to them as their union is sealed.

*"We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."*

These words flow so easily out of them even without a priest or leader to narrate them for them because of what they've witnessed, how they've seen the way Boaz and Ruth see each other. How they see the best of what they could hope for in each other. How they see in each other someone that matches their own desire to care for others and make the world around them better in whatever ways they can.

Often when we bless others at their weddings or otherwise, the words we use, like the ones I mentioned earlier, extend only to the couple and perhaps to the possibility of a growing family, but the words the witnesses speak to Ruth and Boaz, and the words the author of Ruth concludes the story with show us that this blessing is for far more than this moment.

It's for far more than Ruth and Boaz. It's a blessing for their entire tradition.

They don't only wish for Ruth and Boaz to live happy, fulfilling lives. They heap wishes upon them to be like great families of generations past. They wish for them to be long remembered among the matriarchs and patriarchs of all of Israel.

They've seen in them the same things they've heard or read about their ancestors - their care for each other, their perseverance through hardship, their willingness to go above and beyond what might be expected in order to reach newer, higher, holier ground.

When we see the best of who we are as God children reflected in everyday people, we can't help but heap praise on them. We do it in different ways with different words. Sometimes it's blessings like these we've talked about. Sometimes it simple phrases like, "I want to be like you when I grow up," or "I hope my children grow up to be like you" or when we publicly declare in someone's presence to others how wonderful she is and how anyone and everyone would be better off working with or being with or whatever with her.

At a wedding I officiated several years ago, I asked all those are gathered the same questions I mentioned above. I reminded them all of their commitment to encourage and support the couple.

After the ceremony, I can't tell you how many conversations I had with people from all over who talked about the couple just the same way all those in Bethlehem that day talked about Ruth and Boaz. This was a couple who individually and collectively reflected all the best things we hope for ourselves and for others.

And we weren't just happy for them. We knew because of the selfless and courageous ways they each lived their lives that their relationship was strong. We knew that together they would strengthen each other in ways that wouldn't only affect their lives as a couple, but our lives as their friends and family and the lives all those with whom they worked and taught and led.

At the beginning of this story, no one reading Ruth's story could have ever imagined that she, a poor, landless, immigrant widow living with her widowed mother-in-law would rise to levels of Leah and Rachel. We could never have imagined, if we take Matthew's gospel at its word, that she would be mentioned alongside her new mother-in-law, Boaz's mother, Rahab, as women from outside Israel who, through their kindness and compassion (that hesed which Kat talked about at the beginning of Ruth), would help shape Israel forever and keep God's people moving forward closer and closer to their God and toward each other.

But here she is. Here she is because of the way she cares for the widow in her midst. Here she is because of the efforts she takes to care for Naomi. Here she is because of her courage and faith in a foreign land. Here she is. A mother of our faith whom we'll never forget.

Similarly, we don't know until the end of the book who Boaz's family is.

We don't how far back his line stretches or where it branches. We see him doing more than is required of him. We see a man who appears to have internalized in some ways the expectations and responsibilities God has for those who follow.

We see a man who seeks not to follow the laws of Israel for his own benefit, but who interprets them instead for benefit and betterment of those outcast and left behind by the laws of the land. Who doesn't exploit the work of others for his own gain, but offers them opportunities build back what they lost.

Here they are - a daughter of foreigners to Israel and a son of proud Israelite lineage born to a foreign spy and supposed prostitute - an unlikely couple embodying for all those in Bethlehem not only what it means to do right by each other, but live out what it means to be children and followers of God.

In all that they have done throughout their time together in Bethlehem, Ruth and Boaz represent the best of what God and God's people are about. They are a mirror reflecting back an ideal image to the people of Israel of who and how God calls them to be, the unlikely ways that God works within and through us to bring about the Kingdom, the unlikely people God chooses to lead the way.

No one is getting married here today. We don't have a couple to bless, but we are called into relationships each day - with those in and beyond our circles, with the likely and the unlikely, with those who can offer us something and those who come to us with empty hands.

We are called not just to see the goodness in others, but to strive to live out that goodness in our lives too. So, even though no one's getting married, I hope that some words of blessing might go with us and carry us through this week as we strive to remember this in our own lives.

May we, like Ruth, form a community of support, however small it may be, that surrounds those in our midst who need it most regardless of our relationship or responsibility to them.

May we, like Boaz, by our presence, uphold those who come into our lives whether gleaners or landowners, loving them by standing beside them offering them our love and support and not our judgment.

May we, like Naomi, encourage those around us when they need encouragement and listen to them when they ask for advice.

May we honor, love, support, and strengthen one another in ways that reflect the best of who we are and that build up our collective family now and in the days ahead.

If we can do this, then we, like Ruth and Boaz, will find connection not only with one another but with all the cloud of witnesses who've come before us and those who will come after, and with our Creator who makes all life possible.

God is constantly choosing and encouraging us to lead when we least expect it. When we feel we are least capable of bringing anything to the table. God is constantly seeing us through unfathomable difficulties and carrying us into new life.

God is constantly seeking to unite us, regardless of our differences or our shortcomings or our failures or our status, into a community, a family, that reflects God's own nature. God is constantly calling us to see the best in others and to live in ways that make it easy for others to see God in us.

Could they be foreshadowing a couple we come to know later in our own tradition who embody the very same things in the very same town to the very same people?

If we read The Book of Ruth on its own, we might not have pictured Ruth at the beginning of her journey as a woman who would become as revered, if not more, as those whom the crowds hope she will emulate. But if we read this story in the context of the Jewish tradition and our own tradition as followers of Jesus, it is nearly impossible to see any other outcome for her.

So, may we, like Ruth, choose the difficult roads that will inevitably lead us into the unknown and have faith that in doing right by the Naomis in our lives, we can rest assured that we, too, will never be alone.

May we, like Naomi, give guidance to those coming up behind us, not prescribing their future for them, but helping them navigate the world in front of them so that they might succeed in ways beyond our wildest dreams.

May we, like Boaz, understand the ways in which the world works, the systems and structures that frame our societies, and our place in it, and remember that they never work for everyone, so it's our responsibility to reframe them, maybe even circumvent them if we have to, so that those who are cast out or left behind are welcomed in and lifted up.