

Bible Study - Book of Ruth - Week 3

Ruth 3:1-18 (Daring to Act)

In most Western Countries, widows may apply for benefits from their late husband's Social Security, insurance, or company or union benefits. Widows with children receive support payments until their children reach a certain age or finish school. No such safeguards existed in Ruth's day. However, God provided for His people through his 'gleaning' laws, laws of redemption and years of Jubilee. Ancient Israelites did not think they owned any part of the Promised Land because God was the only property owner. The Canaanites and other people who did not live according to His law were driven out. God's people, the Israelites, were then able to occupy the land. Yahweh gave the land to the tribes and clans of Israel.

God intersects with the characters of the book of Ruth the way many of us experience God today: not as divine physical presence, not as a booming voice from heaven, not as a visible mover of events, but as the one to whom we attribute some amount of agency in our own circumstances, as well as those of the world at large. In this way the book of Ruth can feel more accessible than *other* parts of Scripture, where God is portrayed speaking directly to the prophets, kings and heroes.

In today's world we may give thanks after passing an exam or securing

a job or escaping harm in an accident, understanding God's hand to be at work in our good fortune. We are perhaps less quick to attribute our calamities as Naomi does, to God's agency. Then again, if we have escaped harm and others have not, or if we have food to eat and others do not, then acknowledging God's work in the good implies God's hand – or at least, the absence of such a hand – in the bad.

The question of God's activity in the world is a classic and supremely difficult theological dilemma: how do we understand the relationship between human will and divine agency? Different Christian traditions address this question in different ways. The book of Ruth pushes us to tackle those fundamental questions.

The events in this third chapter of Ruth took place several months after Ruth and Naomi arrived in Bethlehem. The wheat and barley crops had been harvested, and the two women had plenty of grain. Belonging requires mutual vulnerability. Yet, in their commitment to each other as individuals across their differences, the two women also find belonging in the community at large.

The interpersonal negotiations around belonging described in Ruth have intergenerational and theological implications. The text pushes its readers to reassess our understandings of insiders and outsiders, to be open to difference, and to look for ways in which our faith communities might find belonging and blessing in new relationships. In the book of

Ruth, we are reminded that it is important to honour the humanity of every person. In a world where connections to one's own family group could determine matters of life or death, Ruth and Naomi's willingness to cross boundaries to create friendship is remarkable. Theirs is a story about what happens when two people from different social locations decide that relationship is more important than cultural definitions of what relationships should be or any experiences that might have kept them apart.

Ruth had no husband to provide for her. Naomi told Ruth that Boaz was their relative. As their relative, as their kinsman, he had specific responsibilities. Naomi wanted what was best for Ruth and knew she would be safe and secure if she remarried. Naomi believed Boaz would be a suitable husband. Naomi's plan gambles on Boaz's honour, exposing her daughter-in-law to the danger of humiliation, if not rape. Perhaps she perceives that Boaz needs his initiative jumpstarted. It's a gamble, but Ruth neither protests nor even raises questions, agreeing to Naomi's scheme.

If Naomi is convinced that God is responsible for her life's experiences, she does not interpret her own role in securing her future to be passive; she doesn't exactly "let go and let God." Naomi hatches a plan for Ruth to forge a relationship with Boaz.

Behaviour that seems peculiar or inappropriate in the twenty-first

century, was considered proper three thousand years ago in Israel. It was appropriate for Ruth to appeal to Boaz for help since he was the *goel* (kinsman-redeemer) of Elimelech's family. If Boaz married Ruth, she would be protected and Elimelech's name would be preserved.

Workers carried the grain to the threshing and winnowing floor, a large, flat area of bedrock or compacted clay worn smooth by many years of hard work. For small harvests, workers beat the grain with sticks. For larger harvests, animals often walked on the crop to separate the grain from the chaff. After the grain was threshed, it was winnowed to separate the grain from the chaff. Winnowing was usually done by several people. They threw the heap of grain and chaff into the air with a pitchfork. The heavy grain fell to the ground and the winds blew the lighter chaff away. The remaining grain was sifted to get rid of heavier waste; pebbles or lumps of earth.

In Ruth's day, marriages were usually arranged by the woman's parents, so Naomi felt it was her responsibility to provide for her beloved daughter-in-law. God guided the events, but God expected the two women to do their parts. Since Ruth was a foreigner, she probably did not understand Hebrew customs, so Naomi's instructions were very detailed. If Ruth was going to propose marriage to Boaz, she needed to know where to go, what to wear, what to say, and how to behave.

She instructs Ruth, to wear her best clothes and anoint herself with oil

to show Boaz she was interested in him. Naomi knew both Ruth and Boaz were honourable and believed nothing improper would take place. Boaz may have been closer to Naomi's age than Ruth's. Naomi understood that Ruth would have to take the first step. She gave Ruth detailed instructions to prepare for her meeting with Boaz. She was to go to the threshing floor and stay out of sight until Boaz went to sleep. Then she would uncover his feet and lie down. This ancient custom was one way a moral, unmarried woman could propose to a single man. Nothing sinful or indecent should be inferred.

People rejoiced after a good harvest. Jews thanked Jehovah and Pagans thanked various agricultural and harvest gods. After a famine that had lasted several years, Bethlehem had an abundant harvest. Boaz was a wealthy man. Robbers or hungry animals could have stolen or destroyed the freshly harvested grain if it had been left unguarded. Boaz probably slept on the threshing floor to protect his crops.

Ruth respected Naomi, trusted her judgment, and obeyed her directions. It was unusual but not unheard of, for a younger woman to propose to an older man. Ruth did as Naomi instructed. Even though she risked shame and humiliation if Boaz rejected her. Both Ruth and Boaz were moral, honourable people, so implying Ruth did anything more than remove the blanket or cloak from his feet would be wrong. This was an acceptable way for Ruth to show Boaz she was willing to become his wife. By lying at his feet, she showed her submission. As this kinsman's widow, Ruth

did not make demands. She came as Boaz's humble servant to claim her right to a levirate marriage.

Ruth referred to herself as Boaz's "servant," but he fondly called her "daughter." The term "daughter" did not indicate he thought of her as a child. Rather it was a term of endearment that indicated he was willing to be her redeemer. She had earned Boaz' respect. He told her not to be afraid. He promised to do as she asked, if the closer kinsman agreed. Boaz trusted God. He did not comment on her beauty, clothes, or perfumed oil. Possessions and beauty will not ensure happy marriages. Righteousness, love, and loyalty attracted Boaz to the young widow.

Boaz was attracted to Ruth, but he did not volunteer to act as her redeemer until she asked for his help. Ruth showed she was loyal to God and her family. Boaz trusted God and saw God's influence in everything Ruth did. Ruth's request for Boaz to spread the corner of his garment over her was a euphemism for marriage or request for protection and assistance. The act of a man spreading his garment over a single woman indicated he was willing to marry her.

Boaz did not act like a rich man doing his poor servant a favour. Rather, he said Ruth was doing him a great kindness. Boaz was willing to redeem the land and wanted to marry Ruth and provide an heir for her late husband. However, there was a closer kinsman. Boaz promised to take Ruth as his wife and redeem the inheritance if the other man

refused.

As soon as Naomi realized Ruth had returned, she was anxious to hear everything that had happened. The mission God gave Naomi was completed. Her beloved daughter-in-law would be cared for. Ruth may have thought Boaz' gift of Barley, given to Ruth as she departed, was to provide for their present needs, but Naomi likely interpreted his acts differently. If Boaz had been unhappy with Ruth's request, it is unlikely he would have given her so much grain. It was reasonable for Naomi to interpret his generosity as a promise to marry Ruth.

In front of witnesses, Boaz invites the other relative to buy a field Naomi is selling. The man has means but has not offered to help the widows. The man agrees to buy the land, but Ruth comes with it. This means that her first son will become Elimelech's heir, and the purchased land will no longer be his. The man declines the offer. Publicly dismissing all other claims, Boaz has cleared the way to join his property and Naomi's free from impingements.

Although "God is silent and acts indirectly through the people," God's care is attested. As a poor woman from another country, Ruth's situation is dire. Though her situation is dire, she is not forgotten. While God is silent, the message is indisputable, "God is on the side of the marginalized." God's care for Naomi and Ruth are indications that God cares even when the world is indifferent. The implication is that Yahweh

is God of the whole world.

Both Ruth and Boaz go above and beyond the minimum requirements of the Law. Ruth is not obligated to stay with her mother-in-law or to leave her homeland. Boaz is not a brother to Ruth's dead husband. He's not even the nearest relative to Naomi. But neither Ruth nor Boaz act out of a legalistic mindset.

Instead, they fulfill the Law by demonstrating *hesed* – loyalty, love, kindness – to Naomi and to each other. And by doing so, they incarnate the *hesed* of God, a God who never speaks in the book of Ruth but who works behind the scenes to bless, to redeem, and to work new life where there was only emptiness and death.

This is an earthy story. It is earthy in about every way a story can be earthy. It is also a theological story – one about how God proves loving and faithful through the simplest of everyday, earthen vessels. The earthiness of the story involves the soil and the matter of bringing in the harvest.

The earthiness of the story also involves celebration. The Israelite high festival of Booths was associated with the barley harvest. After the harvest is gathered, a week-long celebration was commanded by God: “Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the

orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. In Deuteronomy the Israelites are instructed to celebrate for seven days. And lest you imagine some sort of chaste, sober party, God commanded the people to consume “whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, [beer], or whatever you desire.”

That is just what Boaz did. He had a good time, “eating and drinking until he was in a contented mood.” Boaz felt great. And the celebration was seen as a sign of God’s loving faithfulness. The earthiness of the story also involves God’s law and this should not be missed. One of the ways that God’s *hesed* is reaching out in faithful love is through the law as stated in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

- *“When you reap the harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.”*
- *“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest ... you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the LORD your God.”*
- *“You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”*

In the book of Ruth, Boaz and other Bethlehemites are found obeying the law, allowing Ruth and others; the poor, the widowed, and orphans to glean in safety. Through the law and through their obedience, God’s

loving faithfulness was reaching out to Ruth and through Ruth, to Naomi.

The earthiness of the story involves God's law — and this should not be missed. One of the ways that God's *hesed* is reaching out in faithful love is through the law. The night that Ruth lay at Boaz's feet, she was also securing a future for Naomi. All of this God accomplished through the earthy, earthen vessels named Ruth and Boaz and the promises they exchanged.

The Hebrews believed they were God's chosen people, and everyone else, particularly the despised Moabites, were not. Boaz' men informed him Ruth was from Moab, but he was more interested in her righteous reputation than her citizenship. He knew she was honourable and loyal, and he wanted to marry her.

For a Moabite, this approval was a true blessing from God. Ruth was no longer thought of as an inferior immigrant or an outsider. Her old Moabite identity was gone forever. She was now a child of God! What was true for Ruth thirty centuries ago applies to believers today, regardless of language, nationality or ethnicity. We are all children of a caring and loving God!

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Loving God, call us together as your people; transform us with your love. Transform our hearts, that we may love generously. Transform our eyes, that we may see your grace. Transform our hands, that we may serve others. Transform our spirits, that we may be the body of Christ, gathered to worship and sent out to serve. **Amen.**