

Ruth 3-4:12

If you are visiting with us this morning, we've been walking through the book of Ruth in this Advent season. We've seen, in this journey, Naomi become a destitute woman, losing her husband and her two sons in a foreign land. She returns to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a Moabite woman with very little hope of a future in Naomi's very Jewish town of Bethlehem. Last week we saw just how audacious Ruth is, going to glean in a field and demanding a better spot in that field so she can provide for her and her mother-in-law. And we've met Boaz, a man of valor, who upon hearing of what Ruth has done for Naomi, goes above and beyond in granting her request, giving her protection, a place at the table, and more grain to take home than Naomi knows what to do with. We've also discovered that Boaz is a kinsman-redeemer – he is a relative of Naomi – and is therefore duty-bound to help Naomi.

This is where we are when we enter chapter three, and before digging into the details of this text, I want to explain two Israelite customs that will give context to what happens next in the story. One of these laws we've already heard about – the kinsman-redeemer law. The other law is the levirate law, and while the two have similar functions, they play out very differently.

Both laws existed to ensure the continuation of family lines. Say you owned a field, but after a few hard years with less than exceptional crops, you find yourself unable to pay your workers and maintain the field, and are forced to sell. The kinsman-redeemer law requires a relative to buy the field from you, so the field stays in the family, and then hopefully, once you're in a better financial position, they can sell it back to you.

The levirate law had to do with bearing sons. If a woman's husband died, and she had no children, the man's brother was required to marry the woman and hopefully bear a son with her, who would continue the family line of the first husband. Catch that? In order to keep the line going of a dead man, his brother had to marry his widow and bear a son with her. If that brother died, the next brother would have to marry her, and so on, and so forth.

The law that is openly invoked in the story of Ruth is the kinsman-redeemer law, the law of property. But the levirate law comes up...in its absence. Ruth's husband doesn't have a living brother. Both of Naomi's sons died in Moab. Typically a father or uncle would arrange marriage for an unwed girl. But neither of those figures are in the story either.

So, with the audacity we've come to expect in Ruth, and with the determination we now see in a restored Naomi, they take matters into their own hands.

Naomi gives Ruth clear instructions. We're about seven weeks into our story – the grain has been harvested and Boaz would be winnowing the barley on the threshing floor, the final step in the harvest process. And in what is possibly the first written expression of "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Naomi tells Ruth to wait until after Boaz has finished his feasting and is content and sleepy before she makes her proposal.

Ruth must also wait until it's dark so no one sees her approach Boaz. This whole situation would have scandalous consequences if word got out. Then she is to go and uncover his feet and lie down, and wait for him to do something. Naomi stresses quite clearly, "He will tell you what to do."

Ruth does everything just as Naomi directs her. And this is where we typically run into problems with this text. There are probably fifty different interpretations of the events that take place on this threshing floor, some more scandalous than the next. Does Ruth simply uncover Boaz's feet and lie down? Does she uncover more of Boaz? Does she uncover herself? There is simply no clear translation of the Hebrew text – its ambiguous.

But no matter what actually happened, Ruth is putting herself in a vulnerable position. The whole situation is fraught with suggestive overtones...Ruth is in a tough spot. If Boaz were to reject her, he could tell the whole town what Ruth had done – even if it was as simple as uncover his feet – and she would be forced to walk the town with a scarlet A embroidered on her dress.

But here's what we already know about Ruth. Ruth acts out of *hesed*, that sacrificial, above-and-beyond love that motivates us to do courageous and risky things for others. Ruth could have gone after a younger man. Ruth could have gone by the books, and waited in hope that someone might have approached her. Ruth could have just gone on as things were, gleaning in Boaz's field, bringing back grain for Naomi.

But she doesn't. She puts herself in a risky situation. And, going against Naomi's instructions, she doesn't wait for Boaz to give her instructions. Passivity is not one of Ruth's strengths. *She* gives the instructions to Boaz – “spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.”

Now. If you'll remember, the kinsman-redeemer law had to do with buying property. It says *nothing* about marrying a widow. That's a whole different thing. But just as Ruth properly understood the spirit of the gleaning law, so too does she understand the spirit of the kinsman-

redeemer law. At the heart of this law is care for the survival of the family. Marriage to a kinsman-redeemer is Ruth's last hope of securing a son in the line of Elimelech.

Ruth, maybe more than any of the Israelites in Bethlehem, understands what is at the heart of Yahweh's commands: care and protection. She takes Boaz's blessing from the previous scene, "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge," and throws that right back into Boaz's court, asking him to spread his garment – his wings – over her." If Boaz truly wants Ruth to be blessed, he will marry her.

And as we've come to expect from our man Boaz, he responds to Ruth's audacious request with grace and generosity. He lauds her for protecting Naomi by going to a relative, rather than a younger man. He tells her the whole town knows of her sacrifice and thinks favorably of her. Remember how Boaz was introduced as a man of valor, a hero of Homeric proportions? Boaz now describes Ruth with exactly the same word. She is a woman of valor. Boaz has met his match in Ruth. Our story is coming to a swift and happy conclusion.

But there's a wrinkle in this plan. Boaz is not the closest relative. There is a kinsman-redeemer with a closer claim than Boaz, and, to put it crassly, he gets first dibs.

So first thing in the morning, Boaz goes down to the city gate, a gathering place where legal disputes and arguments were often settled. As he sits and waits, who should walk by but the nearer-kinsman redeemer. The author gives us a hint here that this man isn't going to be an important character in the story – he doesn't even get a name!

Boaz calls Mr. So-and-so over, and lays out the situation. And given what we know of the situation...we're a little perplexed at the direction

Boaz takes. Because he doesn't talk about marriage to Ruth...he brings up something we've not encountered before – a field belonging to Naomi.

In the most likely scenario, Elimelech sold his land to a non-family member before he moved to Moab, since none of his family could afford to purchase it at the time. But Naomi still has some claim to the land as the widow of Elimelech. Now that people are in a better financial position, in an effort to bring the land back into the family, Naomi is surrendering her right to the land to a relative who can redeem the field.

Boaz lays this all out, and this strikes Mr. So-and-so as a good deal. He'd be buying the field from a childless widow. There's no chance of a son in that family coming to claim the property in the future. It's all his. The purchase requires no sacrifice, only ultimate financial gain.

So he steps up to the plate and says, "I will redeem it."

And then Boaz turns the screw.

Pulling a Ruth, Boaz appeals to the spirit of the kinsman-redeemer law, the desire to care for and continue a family line, and attaches the levirate law to the situation. He tells Mr. So-and-so, "If you buy this field, you also acquire Ruth, the Moabitess, as a wife."

Well. This changes everything for Mr. So-and-so. If he were to marry Ruth, and Ruth were to have a son, this field that he's buying would one day belong to that son. And not only would Mr. So-and-so have to give him back the field he had purchased, he would also have to divide up the rest of his inheritance to now include this son, damaging the rest of his children's inheritance. All of a sudden this purchase becomes a financial sacrifice.

And it's a sacrifice he's unwilling to make. He backs away from the plate and into the dugout as fast as humanly possible. And that's the end of Mr. So-and-so's story. No name, no legacy, no impact.

Cue Boaz.

Boaz does what the first kinsman-redeemer would not. He acts out of *hesed*, taking on the possibility of financial burden to provide for Ruth and Naomi, and to keep the name of Elimelech alive.

Now, before we go any further, we need to remember something all the way from the first few verses of this book. Ruth was married to her husband for close to ten years before he died in Moab, and in all those years, she didn't produce a child. There is a decent chance that Ruth might be barren. So when she goes to Boaz with her plan to continue the line of Elimelech, and when Boaz goes to the town gate to put this plan into fruition...both of them are trusting wholeheartedly that God is going to do something. There is no guarantee that Ruth will bear a child. All these two are going on is faith. But faith is enough for them to act.

Sometimes we think of faith as a passive thing, a waiting for God to act. Or a matter of trying to do just enough that we stay on the right side of the law, following the rules of our faith. What I love about the story of Ruth, and Naomi, and Boaz, is how they demonstrate a life of faith that is marked by action. None of our characters sit back and say, "We'll let God take care of this." Their obedience is not a passive one. Their obedience, their faith, their understanding of God's *hesed*, God's sacrificial, above-and-beyond love, stirs them to live, to do, to speak out of that same *hesed*, trusting that God is at work.

This is a determined, expectant, hopeful faith. A faith committed to living out of God's heart for the world, no matter how foolish or risky that life might seem.

This is the faith of a husband who goes to the nursing home every day to read to his wife, though she stopped recognizing him years ago.

This is the faith of the constituent who calls her MP every week to demand a timeline for the long-promised housing project.

This is the faith of the parent who brings her child to rehab for the ninth time.

This is the faith of the volunteer who hands a cup of coffee to a street worker in the middle of the night.

This is the faith of the chaplain who prays with a dying patient.

This is the faith of all those who believe that what we do actually matters, even if the results aren't always obvious. It's a faith that trusts that God is up to something, that God's heart is one of *hesed*, and that we are called to live out of God's heart.

This faith doesn't ask, "what's the least I can do in order to be a good person?" but responds to God's love with an outpouring of generosity, kindness, and mercy.

Where are you being invited to live out of *hesed*? What are the opportunities in your life to live out your faith boldly and audaciously, trusting that what you do matters, and that God is using your acts of faith in ways beyond what you can imagine or see right now?

Or maybe you are longing to experience this abundant love, to be reminded that God is at work in your own life, through the faithfulness of people around you.

I'll ask Audrey to come forward now. As the grain is poured, may it be a visual symbol we carry into this week, of either invitation, or encouragement. An invitation to live out of abundant love, and an encouragement that God's abundant love is with us.

So we pray together:

Leader: "Lord Jesus, we long for you.

All: Fill our hearts with your love.

Let us pray.

God, give us a bold and audacious faith.

Not a loud faith, or a triumphant faith -

not something we wave in the face of others to prove ourselves -
but a faith that trusts that *you* are up to something,
and we want to be part of it.

Keep us from parsing out the letter of the law,
content with doing just enough,
and stir in us a desire to live according to the spirit,
with open hands and open hearts.

Thank you for your abundant love,
made most visible to us in the gift of your Son,
Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray,
Amen.