

The Good Stuff

Ruth 3

September 3, 2017

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3 Na'omi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I should be seeking security for you; so that things will go well with you. ² Now there's Bo'az our relative — you were with his girls. He's going to be winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. ³ So bathe, anoint yourself, put on your good clothes, and go down to the threshing-floor; but don't reveal your presence to the man until he's finished eating and drinking. ⁴ Then, when he lies down, take note of where he's lying; later, go in, uncover his feet, and lie down. He will tell you what to do." ⁵ She responded, "I will do everything you tell me."

⁶ She went down to the threshing-floor and did everything as her mother-in-law had instructed her. ⁷ After Bo'az was through eating and drinking and was feeling good, he went to lie down at the end of the pile of grain. She stole in, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ In the middle of the night the man was startled and turned over, and — there was a woman lying at his feet! ⁹ He asked, "Who are you?" and she answered, "I'm your handmaid Ruth. Spread your robe over your handmaid, because you are a redeeming kinsman." ¹⁰ He said, "May *Adonai* bless you, my daughter. Your latest kindness is even greater than your first, in that you didn't go after the young men, neither the rich ones nor the poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you everything you say, for all the city leaders among my people know that you are a woman of good character. ¹² Now, it is true that I am a redeeming kinsman; but there is a redeemer who is a closer relative than I am. ¹³ Stay tonight. If, in the morning, he will redeem you, fine! — let him redeem you. But if he doesn't want to redeem you, then, as *Adonai* lives, I will redeem you. Now, lie down until morning."

¹⁴ She lay at his feet until morning; then, before [it was light enough that] people could recognize each other, she got up; because he said, “No one should know that the woman came to the threshing-floor.” ¹⁵ He also said, “Bring the shawl you are wearing, and take hold of it.” She held it while he put six measures of barley into it; then he went into the city.

¹⁶ When she came to her mother-in-law, she asked, “Who are you? My daughter?” She told her everything the man had done for her. ¹⁷ Then she added, “He gave me these six measures of barley; because he said to me, “You shouldn’t return to your mother-in-law with nothing.” ¹⁸ Na’omi said, “My daughter, just stay where you are, until you learn how the matter comes out; for the man won’t rest unless he resolves the matter today.”

Do most of you enjoy watching movies? My husband, John, enjoys them very much. He is wonderful, too, because he isn’t picky about genre or subject matter...he will even watch a “chick flick” with me. I think the reason this is true is that I rarely have any interest in watching a movie at all. So, when I suggest we watch one together, he’s all over it. My favorite movie watching scenario is to watch one of my favorite movies over again. At this point in my life, I would much rather watch a movie I already know than watch a new, unknown one. I feel like real life holds plenty of surprises, I don’t need that from a movie.

While watching this movie I’ve seen many times, I excitedly wait for the “good part.” One thing I’ve learned is that my husband and I have different definitions of which parts are the “good parts.” Depending on which movie we are watching, the good part for me is the really funny scene or the really gushy love scene, or the part that makes me cry at the end. The “good part” for John is the car chase, the gun fight, the epic special effects, or sometimes he enjoys the really funny scene along with me.

Today we find ourselves in the part of the book of Ruth that many people would call, “the good part.” Every time I’ve mentioned to one of my colleagues that I am preaching a series on Ruth, it never fails, they say, “Oh, you’re talking about *feet* (wink, wink).” And each time I’ve said, “That’s in chapter 3. We aren’t there yet, but I promise, yes, we will be talking about feet.” And then we laugh. People who have spent time reading and studying Ruth learn pretty quickly that in the Hebrew language, the word for feet is a euphemism for genitals. So, if you are the type of person who would identify the *steamy, intimate encounter* scene as “the good part” of the movie, chapter 3 is for you.

But first, let’s rewind and remind ourselves how we got to this place in the story. In chapter 1, finding themselves widowed, with no sons, and therefore vulnerable, Ruth and Naomi shared a new beginning when Ruth made a covenant with Naomi, “Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people, your God, my God.” The women journeyed from Ruth’s home in Moab to Naomi’s home in Bethlehem and experienced another new beginning when they arrived there. In chapter 2, Ruth, in order to care for herself and Naomi, made a plan to glean in the fields and while there met Naomi’s kinsman, Boaz. Another new beginning was in store for the women as a result of Ruth’s “coincidental” exchange with Boaz in the field. He gave Ruth special privileges, instructing her to stay close so that he might provide for her. She did so until the harvest was complete. But, “Now what?” we wondered.

In these first 2 chapters, we saw Ruth’s identity change from Moabite stranger to family. We have read about Ruth’s extraordinary, will not let you go love for Naomi, the Hebrew word for which is *hesed*, and we have read about Boaz’s *hesed* for Ruth demonstrated in the ways in which he made sure Ruth was able to provide for both she and Naomi. We have seen that for every new beginning, there has been an ending.

Now, the harvest has ended, so we can safely predict there will be another new beginning around the corner.

The beginning of chapter 3 finds Naomi anxious about securing a future for Ruth, which in turn would secure a future for herself. As we have discussed, in this time and place, security came through relationship with a man. Without security, women starved. Without it, women were seen as immoral and useless. Marriage was the imperative for Ruth. Time was ticking away...they were still two vulnerable women, with no man and no future. They couldn't just sit around and wait to be saved. They would have to make it happen.

Naomi believed Boaz was the closest male relative in her dead husband, Elimelech's family. This made him what is called the kinsman redeemer. Kinsman is who he was...family. Redeemer is what he does...in this case, the women hope he will marry Ruth, secure the family land, and give her a son so he can inherit the land, securing their future. Based on the way Boaz treated Ruth when she appeared in his field to glean, it seemed clear to the women that he was interested in her well-being, maybe more than her well-being. He was a good bet. He was family. He was well off. And, perhaps most importantly to Naomi, he had treated Ruth with hesed.

To us, this plan to secure a man doesn't seem like a good thing. How many of us would advise our daughters to get dressed up in something slinky, put on some perfume, and go hang out in the dark with an older man who had been drinking a lot? I'm guessing none of us. We must remember, this story is about the lives of two marginalized women who were desperate. They lived in a world, that in some ways reflects the world that even many women still live in today, where a woman's single life option is to get married, whose only long-term security lies in producing male children. The plan Naomi hatched used the only commodity the women had.

The central action, the good part, of chapter 3 takes place on the threshing floor. At the threshing floor, the last step of the harvesting process happens...threshing, winnowing and sifting the grain. From a literary perspective, the threshing floor was associated with fertility. The word threshing was used as a metaphor for sexual intercourse in many agricultural societies. And remember this is a story, with truth, but not facts. The whole thing begins to fall apart if we start asking questions like, "Why would Boaz be sleeping on the threshing floor?" It's a story, and in this chapter especially, it's meant to be funny. It is also meant to be told orally and not read.

The location, setting, and characters come together to create a scene that is fraught with sexuality. The threshing floor associated with fertility, the word for feet is a euphemism for genitals, the characters are brought together under the cover of darkness, both of them vulnerable...Ruth risking rejection and humiliation, Boaz under the influence of alcohol, asleep (or passed out). Ruth crept over to Boaz in the dark, laid down, and uncovered his "feet." The scene plays out as we might expect it to. Boaz didn't refuse her company and, in fact, invited her to stay with him until morning. Through the conversation between Boaz and Ruth, we learn Boaz is willing to act as redeemer for Ruth, but there is another relative, a closer relative, who must be consulted before Boaz can marry Ruth. He makes a plan to talk to him the next day. In the meantime, Ruth laid at Boaz's "feet" until morning when she was given some barley and sent home to Naomi.

Her planned encounter with Boaz had the desired outcome. He made a commitment, "I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman." When she arrived home, as we might guess, Naomi was waiting with a question. The NRSV translation and most others translate the question, "How did things go with you,^[e] my daughter?" It footnotes what I think is the

better translation, though, “Who are you?” “My daughter?” Identity. Ruth’s identity has shifted throughout this narrative. And now the question is, “As a result of what had happened between Boaz and Ruth in the dark, unobserved space of the threshing floor, who is she now?” Ruth responds by telling Naomi, “...everything the man had done for her.”

In some respects, at this point in the story, we can begin to see what many of us demand in a good story, happily ever after. We have to note though, Ruth and Naomi did not sit around and wait for Prince Charming to appear with a glass slipper, they made it happen. According to Joan Chittister, in her book, *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman’s Life*, “...the Book of Ruth is quite plain about the situation. What any of us need for ourselves we will need to assure for ourselves. Nothing changes until we change it. We cannot be saved by waiting for God to turn life upside down. God does not intervene with trumpet and chariot in the life we create for ourselves. In fact, God is not really a character in the Book of Ruth. God is a reality upon whose essence, whose love, the women rely, but God is not a magic act...If God is demonstrating anything at all in Ruth, it has got to be that we all have in ourselves everything we need to reconfigure the pieces of our soul. It is simply having the courage to be everything that God has given us the gifts to be.”

As I look at the world through the lens of this text, I am more convinced than ever that the world will be different when we are different. This week we have watched on TV as the people in Houston have experienced the effects of Hurricane Harvey. They have cried out for help. They have rejoiced as they have been rescued. They have lost everything they owned. And found themselves grateful for community, grateful for sacrificial love, for the kindness of strangers, and for even the briefest moments of sunshine. And many of us have responded by donating money and supplies, volunteers have descended on Houston

with boats and food and water. I've heard person after person saying, "This is who we are. Helping each other, lifting each other up...this is what makes us Americans." We are at our best when we are able to see past our differences and see what we have in common.

There was something else in the news this week that caused me to reflect on Ruth and the importance of identity. A group of evangelical Christian leaders released a statement they have named the "Nashville Statement," although the mayor of Nashville was not happy about that. More than 150 leaders signed it. At least one leader in Bartlesville, Everett Piper, President of Oklahoma Wesleyan University, signed the statement. The statement is an anti-LGBTQ statement which has done nothing but further divide our nation. This group of leaders believes that who a person loves, and how our neighbors express their gender identity is a threat to the church. To that, I say, "They must think very little of God and very little of the church." Human beings are not a threat to God and lest we forget, the church belongs to God. The real threat to the church is leaders who use their position to exclude others, rather than throwing open the doors and saying, "You are welcome here and meaning it." The real threat to the church is an unwillingness to adequately respond to our brothers and sisters who have been hurt by the church over and over again.

I know I've said it before, but it is not enough to believe in our hearts that all means all. It is not enough to say it in our homes and within the walls of this church. We have to say it in this community, clearly and boldly. Because I can tell you this, the people who stand with the signers of the Nashville Statement are telling their friends and neighbors, they're telling the world what they believe and it is costing us. It is costing us the young people who give up hope of ever belonging and choose death by suicide. It is costing us the people who hide their true selves away out of fear of rejection. And it is costing all of us the

opportunity to be whole. The church, the world, can never be whole as long as there are people who are excluded.

When we draw lines, build walls, and close doors between ourselves and other people, we must remember that God stands on the other side with those who have been excluded. I have been encouraged this week as I've read a number of counter Nashville statements, proclaiming God's love and welcome for all people, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. The trick, I believe, for all of us who believe that is to proclaim it and live it. Be bold. Be brave. Be you.

Just as Ruth was willing to take a risk to secure a different future for herself and for Naomi, we have to be willing to risk in order to secure a different future for ourselves, for our black and brown skinned brothers and sisters and for all people, no matter who they love or how they express who they are, and no matter what they have experienced, where they are from or where they are on their way to. And, I believe, in the vulnerable work of risking is where we will be reminded of our own identity, our own place in the world. We will be reminded that the primary marker of identity for God's people is that we are, all of us are, the recipients of God's hesed...love that will not let us go. Our job is to make that love known to the world. Amen.