

Redeemer
Ruth 4: 1-12
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Luke 1:46-55

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Ruth 4: 1-12

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, 'Come over, friend; sit down here.' And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, 'Sit down here'; so they sat down. He then said to the next-of-kin, 'Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.' So he said, 'I will redeem it.' Then Boaz said, 'The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance.' At this, the next-of-kin said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.'

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself', he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.' Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, '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.'

Ruth 4:13-22

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

For the past four weeks we’ve been in the book of Ruth. This book is set during the time of the Judges, which is to say, the late Iron Age, after the Exodus and before the first kings of Israel. You remember the story: a Hebrew man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi and two sons go to Moab, modern-day Jordan, in search of economic opportunity. Both sons take local wives. And Elimelech and both sons die.

As women in an agrarian society, Naomi and her daughters-in-law cannot inherit. They have no food and no way to get it. As women with no protector, they are vulnerable at a level that is nearly unimaginable to Americans today. If someone chooses to take advantage of them, there is literally nothing that they can do about it.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, goes back to her mother, as is customary. Naomi starts walking back to Bethlehem, in hope that God will feed her in this place that is called literally “The House of Bread.” The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to go back, and insists on going

with Naomi. She uses beautiful words to express her *hesed*, stubborn, unreasonable love: “Where you will go, I will go, where you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.”¹

They go to Bethlehem, and Ruth gleans, taking the leftovers from the barley and wheat harvests on the land of a righteous Hebrew man named Boaz. She learns from Naomi that Boaz is a relative of Naomi’s late husband Elimelech. He is not the closest male relative, with the duty to buy Elimelech’s land and take care of these widows, but he’s on the short list of men who are supposed to step up if the closest relative does not.

Boaz is unreasonably good to Ruth. He goes far beyond what he is required to do, even by the standards of Hebrew law, which is much more generous to widows and foreigners than that of any other society. Even though every stalk of grain she takes is one fewer stalk going into his barns, he has her eat and drink what he provides for his harvest workers. He instructs his people not to harass her, and even tells them to leave extra grain for her on purpose.

One night, Ruth goes to Boaz on the threshing floor, and she finds him asleep. She lies down with him, and, when he awakes, she essentially proposes to him.² She expresses to him that same kind of *hesed*: stubborn, unreasonable love. He is older than she is, and apparently surprised by this young widow proposing to him. But he tells her that he will find this next of kin. That man has legal claims on Ruth and Naomi and the land once owned by Elimelech that Boaz, a righteous man, does not want to violate. Boaz is a righteous man, and he does things decently and in order.³ If that man will take care of her, then good. If not, Boaz will.

¹ Ruth 1:16-17.

² I take no position on whether the two of them had sex on the threshing floor: while it is certainly implied in the original Hebrew text (“feet” is not an uncommon euphemism), it is not stated outright, and it is, frankly, not vital to the point of the story.

³ Like a good Presbyterian!

Our story picks up only a few hours later. Boaz has gone to the town gate, where business is conducted, and waited. This next of kin comes walking by. Boaz calls him over and calls over ten of the elders of the town to witness this discussion. In a world where writing is still uncommon, he wants there to be no confusion here.

The man, whose name we never even get, initially wants to buy the land. Land is the one resource nobody's making any more of, and, in an agrarian world like this one, it is the only riches worth mentioning.

Then Boaz springs the trap. With the land comes responsibility to bring Naomi, Elimelech's widow, and her daughter-in-law Ruth, into his household and to take care of them for as long as they live. The man would also be responsible for making sure that Elimelech had a male heir to inherit the land when he came of age. This is how Hebrew society at this time takes care of widows and orphans in a land with no Social Security, no SNAP or other benefits for the poor. Your children are the only old-age provision you could possibly have, and this is an artificial way that Hebrew society gives children to those who have none.

The man grows pale. "Hold on a minute. I can't do that without messing things up for my family and my inheritance for my kids. Hard pass. It's yours. The land, the women, everything."

He is not being unreasonable, or racist, or evil, as he sees it. He is being responsible and pragmatic and looking out for his family. However, at that moment, we see why we never get his name: it's not important. At that moment, he passes out of history.

Boaz accepts the transaction and marries Ruth. Whatever may be his usual style, Boaz is not being reasonable or pragmatic here. He demonstrates that same kind of *hesed* love that Ruth has. He risks the same things that the other man refused to risk, and he marries Ruth.

Ruth and Naomi move into Boaz's house. Ruth has a son, and names him Obed, "One who serves." This son becomes Elimelech's heir, in addition to Boaz's, and he supports Naomi and Ruth through their old age. This is what the women mean when they say, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' With Ruth and Boaz' marriage, Naomi has gone from the most precarious socioeconomic position imaginable to living in the household of the richest man in town. With the birth of this child, she is secure for life. God has replaced the family that she had lost in Moab.

The last paragraph of the reading, and the last paragraph of the book, gives us one more piece of context for this story. Perez is the grandson of Jacob, Isaac's son and the grandson of Abraham. The generations are laid out to Boaz, and then it says that Obed is the father of Jesse, and Jesse is the father of David, the greatest king of the Hebrew people. The great King David had a Moabite great-grandmother named Ruth.

As Christians, we have the New Testament, which repeats this genealogy in Matthew Chapter One, and continues it through Solomon all the way to a Hebrew man in the first century BC named Joseph, the husband of Mary.⁴ Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ.

So what does all this mean?

Is this just some of Jesus' family history? I mean, it's a cool story and all. If Hollywood insists on making movies of Biblical stories, I would love to see a new one of this story. The 1960 sword-and-sandal movie could use a re-telling.⁵ But so what?

⁴ Matthew 1:2-16.

⁵ *The Story of Ruth*: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0054343/?ref_=fn_tt_tt_25

Why is this story even in the Bible? Jesus has any number of ancestors whose names are barely mentioned in the Bible. I mean, who knows anything about Zadok, son of Azor? He's just one example. Why is this story told?

The answer is that it teaches us about the values of God.

That notion of *hesed* – stubborn, unreasonable love that is put into practice and that overcomes obstacles – runs all through this book. Ruth expresses that kind of love for Naomi, and then for Boaz. She follows Naomi into a strange land and takes care of her there. She risks her reputation and her life for Boaz.

Boaz expresses it for Ruth. Under God's law, he has to let her glean, but he goes beyond that. He makes sure that she gets enough food, and that she is safe while she works. He effectively gives her grain from his fields, and shields her with his protection. He expects nothing from her in return.

If you do something for someone because you expect them to do something for you, even simply to smile or to be pleasant, you're not doing kindness, you're doing business. Boaz is doing kindness. This is what it is to love your neighbor like God commands. This is what it is to accept the foreigner as one of your own, as God commands in Leviticus.⁶

When Ruth comes to Boaz on the threshing floor, he could have had his way with her and then discarded her. Who are people going to believe, the rich local landowner with a good reputation, or the foreign woman living off charity? But no. He goes beyond not taking advantage of her, which is the minimum to be a decent human being. He sends her home that

⁶ Leviticus 19:33-34.

night with a bridesprice-worth of grain, and then he puts his influence on the line that very morning to make things right for her.

The other man could have said yes, and he would have been bound to take care of Ruth in his household. The other man is pragmatic, and reasonable, and takes care of his own. But he does not take care of his neighbor.

What happens to him? He is not punished on the spot, but he loses his opportunity to be part of this story of God and God's people.

Boaz and Ruth are well-matched. They are people of substance, people who love beyond what the world considers reasonable, and who follow through on that love with action in the world. They are the kind of people who expand God's kingdom in the world..

May we be that kind of people.

All of us.

AMEN.