

# Ruth | Tenderness in the Midst of Brutality

“There IS a Redeemer”

Ruth CH 3

12.15.19

*Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?"<sup>2</sup> "Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight."<sup>3</sup> "Wash yourself therefore, and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes, and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking."<sup>4</sup> "It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do."<sup>5</sup> She said to her, "All that you say I will do."*

*<sup>6</sup> So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her.<sup>7</sup> When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down.<sup>8</sup> It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet.<sup>9</sup> He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative."<sup>10</sup> Then he said, "May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich."<sup>11</sup> "Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence."<sup>12</sup> "Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I."<sup>13</sup> "Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem you. But if he does not wish to redeem you, then I will redeem you, as the LORD lives. Lie down until morning."<sup>14</sup> So she lay at his feet until morning and rose before one could recognize another; and he said, "Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor."<sup>15</sup> Again he said, "Give me the cloak that is on you and hold it." So she held it, and he measured six measures of barley and laid it on her. Then she went into the city.*

*<sup>16</sup> When she came to her mother-in-law, she said, "How did it go, my daughter?" And she told her all that the man had done for her.<sup>17</sup> She said, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, 'Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"<sup>18</sup> Then she said, "Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today."*

We've moved from the Book of Judges to the Book of Ruth (for Advent). The time of Judges was a cruel, violent and lawless time and the Book of Ruth is a "tender shoot out of parched ground" (Isa 53.2). Ruth is a love story and a redemption story IN the time of Judges!

AND, for us, it's a strange story with some very odd customs especially in the area of courtship. Of course, IF people in the ancient world knew about some of our customs – meeting people on

a black, rectangular, hand-held screen – they'd think THAT was pretty weird. The mating rituals of modern South Floridians and of birds and of the ancient Israelites are all a little weird!

And yet, if we can be not so culturally superior and judgey for a moment... and IF we can see some of the big themes of LIFE and big themes of the Bible that connect in this passage and that have a kind of trans-cultural appeal, a universal resonance with the way (I believe) God has wired our brains and hearts – I think this passage can incite and enthrall us to think about God and a relationship with Him in new ways: a Sacred Romance.

Let's make these connections and see how Eros and Agapé may be closer together than you think – how erotic love AND the love of God are wedded:

- 1) A Runaway Bride and Her Matchmaker**
- 2) A Groom with Cold Feet (for better and for worse)**
- 3) Why We Can't Stop Singing About Love**

Ruth is a Gentile who's far from home – she's the runaway bride in my title. She's a widowed Moabitess That nation originated in the shameful, incestuous union of Lot and his daughters in Genesis CH 19.

And Naomi her mother-in-law, also a widow has returned from ten-years in Moab with her Gentile daughter-in-law. Naomi went from Bethlehem full (husband and two sons) and returned empty/bereft.

Last week she was bitter, depressed and lethargic at the start of CH 2 but then, she learned that her foreign daughter-in-law “happened” upon a field of a compassionate man who lived in covenant with God and that HE (Boaz) was a relative. AND RUTH CAME TO LIFE! This week, she's moved from sad and lifeless to excited and in charge. She initiates a plan! She plays the matchmaker! “My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you?” (1)

That word means “rest” (see 1.9). Naomi may be thinking of what could happen to Ruth, the Gentile, if SHE (her Jewish mother-in-law) died. And Naomi's two questions – BOTH phrased as a negative (“Shall I NOT seek...?” and “Is NOT Boaz our relative...?”) she is being assertive (even a little pushy!) AND the plan IS MORE THAN A LITTLE RISKY!

“Get dressed – don't wear your widow/mourning dress but one that shows that you're ...you know... available. And...uh...maybe some perfume...”

Then she tells Ruth, “Go to the threshing floor... (where they process the harvest – separate grain from chaff) and when the big boss-man Boaz has finished work, eaten and had a little wine... Go and ...uh... cozy up to him.” Ruth says (5), “I'm IN!”

The next paragraph is the longest and carefully written – she acts then says. He says then acts (mirror image). He's tired and full of food and drink and happy after the harvest festival. She gives him cold feet (uncovers his feet) and cozies up.

Then, middle of the night, pitch black, he's surprised to find a woman snuggled up to him. And THIS is the moment of truth – how will he respond?

He might shame her...call her a bad name...assume she's a prostitute, say, "Get away! I'm a righteous man and you disgust me!" (Would've been awful!)

OR he could've gone the other way and tried to take advantage of her because, "evidently she's consenting so...sure... it's dark...no one will see..." (Awful too!)

But Boaz, doesn't go the moralist-route ("Get away! My mother warned me about girls like you!") AND he doesn't go the hedonist-route ("Sure! We're both consenting adults... WHY NOT?!")

Instead, he asks, "Who are you?" and she says, "It's me, Ruth! Your maid... So share some of those covers because you're my redeemer and I DO want to be redeemed!" In other words: she's proposing marriage! "You're the one the law provides to marry me, to raise children to preserve the property and the line of Elimelech! And I want you to THINK of me in this way – not simply as a compassion case but as a wife! I'm making my intentions crystal clear!"

And... it turns out... he HAS apparently entertained this thought already! He's attracted to her. He thinks of her as a woman of excellence. He's treated her with kindness and she has responded with kindness.

Boaz invokes the Name of God, (10), "May you be blessed of YHWH, my daughter" (He's apparently older – not too old to work on the threshing floor [2]. And while she could've found a younger man or a wealthier man – she wants HIM and is taking the advice of the matchmaker) And soon we're gonna be hearing wedding bells...

Except... there is one matter, another relative even closer in the family tree. And legally that unnamed "other guy" has to be approached... (Ruth is sad) "But", says Boaz, "leave him to me!" (Boaz has apparently been thinking A LOT about Ruth!)

Then he answers her symbolic acts (uncovering his feet) with symbolic acts of his own. He tells his workers to keep quiet (doesn't want to shame her) and he sends her home with her cloak full of grain!

And when the matchmaker, Naomi, sees the giant sack of grain, she knows her plan worked. Naomi returned empty but Ruth (the Gentile) has come back FULL! And Naomi assures her daughter, "Wait! You'll see! This man is serious about you and he will work it out... BTW, what color were you thinking for the bridesmaids dresses?"

Now, why do we like this stuff? It feels like *Pride and Prejudice* (Boaz is like Mr. Darcy!) and no matter how many times we've heard these "happily ever after" romances, they still make us smile. Men and women alike, young and old: "You'd think that people would've had enough of silly love songs / I look around me and I see it isn't so..."

And the thing is – as some people have observed – the songs we go back to again and again are LOVE SONGS. There's something about the union of these opposite forces of MALE and FEMALE and the whole dance that brings these opposite forces together, opposite and apparently incompatible but somehow mysteriously complementary and suitable.

There's a passage in Proverbs (CH 30) I often quote in weddings: "There are three things which are too wonderful for me, four which I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship in the middle of the sea, and the way of a man with a maid." (18-19)

It's a way of saying, "Nature is a mystery – eagle, snake on a rock (moving without legs) sail-boat somehow making progress even into the wind... but the thing that really blows me away is this MALE and FEMALE thing...how opposites attract...the dance!"

The Bible is the Sacred Romance. Jesus Christ is the Better and Perfect Boaz who comes to redeem His bride (the Church) by living/obeying in her place, by dying for her crimes and by slaying the dragon that has always tormented her – by putting death to death in His resurrection (Heb 2.14-16).

Love stories, love songs are whispers of the meaning of the universe. Even in silly love songs, there's something that resonates inside us. It's like the frequency of THAT VIBRATION we just instinctively know and recognize. There are, IN THE BIBLE, all these romances. There's a long love song near the center of the Bible (Song of Songs) and the Bible both begins and concludes with a wedding.

All history culminates in a wedding.

And IN male/female relationships and marriages there exists the possibility of experiencing this sublime, transcendent participation of divine love.

Eros and Agapé are not that far apart. It's why Paul (who was apparently single) could nonetheless speak of marriage as a mystery, "This (two becoming one flesh) is a great mystery; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." (Ephesians 5.32)

A man laying down his life in order to allure his wife toward holiness and a wife laying down her life for her husband to win him over to God (1 Peter 3). It's a wonder (to the Proverbs writer); it's a mystery that points to Christ according to Paul and Peter and it's somehow the destiny of everyone, male and female, married or single who believe in Jesus Christ. We will participate eternally in a love so intimate that the closest thing this life gets to it is marital love. Heaven and the New Creation is an eternal love story; it's a wedding feast that knows no end.

And there are IN this courtship episode (that we find so strange), there are other "tropes" or metaphors and symbolic storylines we don't want to miss. There's the Cinderella story.

Ruth is the Cinderella. She's a Gentile outsider whose people, the Moabites, originated in the shame of incest. She's widowed and poor and has no rest or security, bereft and vulnerable but THE KINDNESS OF GOD (hesed) finds her out and she becomes included and important and in the end... she's royalty.

And this too is the story of every person who comes to believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ. If you are a Gentile (as most of us are), in Jesus you are included in God's people. And even if you're Jewish, in Jesus Christ, your sin and shame are atoned. The death of Jesus Christ is the true and final "Yom Kippur", the Day of Atonement. Atonement means covering and here we see the symbol as Ruth asks the redeemer, "cover me".

We're ALL Cinderella – stained by cinders, in the ashes of sin and guilt but for everyone who believes, THE Redeemer symbolized in Boaz, in Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of all God's people, we are covered.

And there's the matchmaker trope. People who believe in Jesus Christ have the great privilege of playing Naomi to our neighbors. We can ask people, "Would you like me to tell you where I found rest and security? Once, I trusted in my health, my good deeds, my politics, my bank account, my career but I realized that they could all be taken away..."

In this little episode we have a rare glimpse of the Israelite Church, before the coming of Christ, really carrying out its God given mission. A Gentile is drawn to Bethlehem, the House of Bread. There she not only finds bread and material provision but also finds true security in the hesed (grace and covenant faithfulness of God and His people). She's included.

Today the mission is a bit different but just as important – not to draw people to a center (not Jerusalem or Rome or Colorado Springs) but to go OUT. We get to be matchmakers gone OUT into the world to tell all people the Good News of where they can find rest and security.

The historical Person, Jesus of Nazareth came onto the stage of human history to live and die and rise again for the sinful and restless... If you approach Him (as Ruth approached Boaz) He promises that He will cover you. He Himself said, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” (John 6.37)

Ruth may have been anxious about the groom with cold feet NOT receiving her... but we do not have that fear regarding the Final and True Redeemer – we have His open invitation and His promise.