

## **A Full Life, A New Life, A Connected Life**

*August series: The Book of Ruth – Full, Empty, Full*

Ruth 4 (selected verses)

August 28, 2022

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*1 Boaz went straight to the public square and took his place there. Before long the "closer relative," the one mentioned earlier by Boaz, strolled by. "Step aside, old friend," said Boaz. "Take a seat." The man sat down. 2 Boaz then gathered ten of the town elders together and said, "Sit down here with us; we've got some business to take care of." And they sat down. 3 Boaz then said to his relative, "The piece of property that belonged to our relative Elimelech is being sold by his widow Naomi, who has just returned from the country of Moab. 4 I thought you ought to know about it. Buy it back if you want it.... The Message Ruth 4:1-4*

One of my favorite writers and preachers died two weeks ago - Frederick Buechner. He wrote over 30 books, including novels and sermons. In his book *Peculiar Treasures*, he turned cardboard biblical characters into real people: Moses, "breathing his last up there in the hills with his sore feet and aching back." Noah, his "eyes closed and tears on his cheeks as the dove lands on the calluses of his upturned palm." Sarah, "cackling and giggling behind the tent door so the angel wouldn't think she was being rude." It was of the first books that opened up the Bible as literature and storytelling to me. Buechner showed that the people were flawed and fallible and treasured by God. Like all of us. Like me. Here is part of his description of Ruth.

RUTH was a Moabite girl who married into a family of Israelite transplants living in Moab because there was a famine going on at home. When her young husband died, her mother-in-law, Naomi, decided to pull up stakes and head back for Israel where she belonged. The famine was over by then, and there was no longer anything to hold her where she was, her own husband having died about the same time that Ruth's had. She advised Ruth to stay put right there in Moab and to try to snag herself another man from among her own people.

Naomi was a strong-willed old party, and when Ruth said she wanted to go to Israel with her, she tried to talk her out of it. Even if by some gynecological fluke she managed to produce another son for Ruth to marry, she said, by the time he was old enough, Ruth would be ready for the geriatric ward.

But Ruth had a mind of her own too, besides which they'd been through a lot together, what with one thing and another, and home to her was wherever Naomi was. "Where you go, I go, and where you live, I live," ...So Naomi gave in, and when the two of them pulled in to Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown, there was a brass band to meet them at the station.

Ruth had a spring in her step and a fascinating Moabite accent, and it wasn't long before she caught the eye of a prosperous farmer named Boaz. He was a little long in the tooth, but he still knew a pretty young woman when he saw one, and before long, ... he took her under his wing. He told the hired hands not to give her any trouble. He helped her in the fields. He had her over for a meal. And when she asked him one day in her disarming Moabite way why he was being so nice to her, he said he'd heard how good she'd been to Naomi, who happened to be a distant cousin of his, and as far as he was concerned, she deserved nothing but the best.

Naomi was nobody's fool and saw which way the wind was blowing long before Ruth did. She was dead set on Ruth's making a good catch for herself, and since it was obvious she'd already hooked old Boaz whether she realized it or not, all she had to do was find the right way to reel him in. Naomi gave her instructions. As soon as Boaz had a good supper under his belt and had polished off a nightcap or two, he'd go to the barn and hit the sack.

Around midnight, she said, Ruth should slip out to the barn and hit the sack too. If Boaz's feet just happened to be uncovered somehow, and if she just happened to be close enough to keep them warm, that probably wouldn't be the worst thing in the world either.

Ruth followed her mother-in-law's advice...., and it worked like a charm. Boaz was so overwhelmed that she'd pay attention to an old crock like him when there were so many young bucks running around in tight-fitting jeans that he fell for her hook, line, and sinker and, after a few legal matters were taken care of, made her his lawful wedded wife. (1)

Tragedy and comedy woven together. Buechner reminds us that this is the story of Ruth and that is the story of life. When we want to tell the truth about life, it is both. His theology was that the good news of the gospel is both tragedy and comedy. He wrote the tragic is the inevitable. The comic is the unforeseeable. (2) And that God is with us in the midst of both.

Chapter 4 is interesting for a few reasons. The scene at the city gate is drawn in vivid detail. This place is the equivalent of a modern courtroom, but there is no judge present. Transactions and disputes were settled by the elders at the gate. Boaz acts according to the practice of his time. The tempo of the scene is slow. Actions and words are in clear and minute detail. We also notice that this scene is one where only men are present. Our two main characters of Ruth and Naomi are absent. And yet the discussion is about property and the women connected to it.

It is a frustrating scene about keeping women out of legal and communal decisions.

Yet, the scene at the city gate is also a human and humorous one. The nearer relative, the potential *goel* (redeemer) with whom Boaz speaks, is never named and is given the chance to buy the land that belonged to Elimelech. This other distant cousin is enthusiastic about

acquiring more land, but suddenly remembers a previous appointment and makes himself scarce when Boaz says that marrying Ruth the Moabite is part of the bargain. So, having fulfilled the law, Boaz receives the blessing of the elders on his marriage to Ruth. To make this transaction official, Boaz removes his sandal as the official sign, the notary republic seal of the time.

The story could have ended there with the announcement of the marriage and the men of the community having the last word. They offer blessings and congratulations to Boaz.

But no. Verse 13 switches into a fast tempo. Before we know it, Ruth and Boaz are not only married but they have a son. One sentence, and more than nine months have gone by. The scene changes from public transactions and men's deliberations to family life. God, who was accused earlier of withholding life, is part of a new chapter of new life. Ruth has a child. That could have been the end of the story. (3)

But no. There is more. There are connections to the beginning of the story that began in tragedy and emptiness. When Naomi first returns to Bethlehem after her husband and sons have died, her friends surround her and welcome her back. But she is sad and mad -

*She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but God has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the God has dealt harshly with me, ... (1:20-21)*

In Chapter 4 the storyteller puts Naomi and her community back into the center.

*14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 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." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17 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. (4:14-17)*

The women are rejoicing with her. Their first word is "Blessed." offering her blessings and celebrating with her. And praising God for this abundance. The line "*Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer.*" Who is this redeemer? It could be Boaz. Boaz had acted as a redeemer. It could be the child. In the next verse we read that the child is a restorer of life and nourisher. It could be Ruth. If a redeemer is the one who provides a new possibility of life, then Ruth has done this for Naomi. It could be God. After all is said and done, the human actions have passed, the women turn to God with praise. Maybe redeemer has multiple levels of meaning. (4)

*For your daughter-in-law who loves you,* This is the first time the word “love” appears in the story. It Ruth’s love for Naomi, this chosen *hesed*, loyalty, belongingness. It is not expected. It is a gift. It is action and words and the women are praising God for all these blessings.

Where there was death, now there is birth and new life. Where there was isolation and bitterness, there is community and gratitude for love. Empty to a full life. All of it is made possible through the *hesed* of God, enacted by Ruth and Boaz, ordinary people who demonstrate extraordinary love and faithfulness.

The book of Ruth ends with a genealogy. This child, Obed, will be the grandfather of David, Israel’s most beloved king. And Ruth shows up in the genealogy in the gospel of Matthew in the birth story of Jesus. A Moabite woman, an outsider, who is grafted into the family tree.

Who have been the people in our lives who have walked with us through loss and grief and change? How did they help us know we were not alone and that a new chapter was possible? How might we sense the ways the Spirit was and is present in our lives in times of tragedy and loss as well as those moments of joy and humor and transformation? How might we look back on our stories to notice moments of grace? Close with a bit more of Frederick Buechner’s wisdom.

His father died by suicide when he was a child so he was well acquainted with tragedy, loss and grief. His first novel was a great success. His second novel was not well received. It was in New York City that he had an experience that changed the course of his life and work. He began attending Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. Growing up, neither side of his family had a “church connection of any kind,” as he put it, but he went because he happened to live next door and “because I had nothing else to do on a Sunday.”

One Sunday he was struck by a particular turn of phrase by the church’s pastor, the Rev. George Buttrick: “Christ is crowned in the hearts of those who love him and believe in him amidst confession and tears and great laughter.” *At the phrase “great laughter,” for reasons that I have never satisfactorily understood, the great wall of China crumbled and Atlantis rose up out of the sea, and on Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street, tears leapt from my eyes as though I had been struck across the face.”* (5)

He decided he wanted to join the church, to focus on deepening his knowledge and experience of the spiritual life rooted in Christian community. He went to Union Seminary in NYC. He ordained to the ministry of writing by Presbyterian Church.

When asked to summarize his theology, he wrote, “Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and the pain of it no less than the excitement and the gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

...The grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you."

Amen.

- 1) Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 42.
- 2) Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 57
- 3) Dr. Johanna W.H. Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands*, (United Methodist Church, 1987), 28-29
- 4) Bos
- 5) David Brooks, "The Man Who Found His Inner Depths," NYT 8/18/22  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/18/opinion/columnists/frederick-buechner-inner-depths.html>