

A Suggestive Third Act with Surprising Roles

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

Ruth 3 (selected verses)

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1 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor.

3 Now wash 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.

4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do."

Ruth 3:1-4

We continue our journey through the book of Ruth. In chapter one, Naomi's troubles are relentless as one by one, famine, displacement, death, and grief steal her joy, turning her into a bitter woman. Her life and the life of her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth seem empty in every way. In chapter two Ruth ekes out a living for her mother-in-law Naomi and herself. Ruth goes gleaning. There is no explicit mention of God or the Holy One. As the narrative evolves, there are some moments in hindsight that suggest events were not a coincidence. Two women making their way in a man's world, in a patriarchal system.

Last week we heard about Boaz, owner of the field, who offers a blessing to Ruth. He prays that "YHWH offer you reward for your deeds, a full reward from YHWH, God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge" (Ruth 2:12). Keep that word "wing" in mind.

Boaz made sure she went home with plenty of food. It seemed like Boaz may be more than just kind neighbor. Six weeks pass. And yet there are no hand-made love letters, no boxes of chocolates, no flowers delivered in a lovely gourd vase. Who makes the next move?

From the beginning of chapter 3, Naomi takes over. She is aware of the kindness of Boaz, who saw Ruth gleaning in his field, blessed her for her devotion to Naomi, and offered protection and food. Naomi knows she and Ruth need to take action. Naomi asks Ruth, – *My daughter should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you?" (3:1)* Naomi comes up with a plan to act on Boaz' attention, kindness and family responsibility. She becomes the agent of change.

We find out that the harvest is in full swing and the harvest ball is happening when the men celebrate with good food and drink. Naomi announces that Boaz is a near kinsman and concocts a fantastic and dangerous plot get Boaz hopefully to marry Ruth so the two women can have land and security. She urges Ruth to put on her best clothes from Nordstroms, her best jewels, her finest Channel #5 perfume and head down to the threshing floor where all of

the men will be carousing after they have measured and stacked their harvests. Go to the man where he is sleeping, Naomi directs, and then adds, "*he will tell you what to do*" (Ruth 3:4). So Ruth glams herself up, and heads off to the threshing floor, but she does not quite do all that her mother-in-law advises.

This part of the story can make us feel uncomfortable, even angry. How can a story so antiquated and outdated, even offensive instruct us? What comes up for you when you hear this story of a woman dressing up to attract a man to marry her? To entice him? Maybe trick him? Remember this – Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite and Boaz was a wealthy Jewish landowner. Boundaries are being crossed and characters are acting bound by the system.

She finds Boaz's heap of grain, and its owner sleeping soundly near it, and creeps over to him, uncovers his "feet," and lies down to wait. The fact that "feet" is often a euphemism for genitals in Hebrew adds a certain intrigue to the tale, making it perhaps PG-13 at least! Boaz is startled awake and demands to know just who this brazen woman may be. "I am Ruth, your companion" (not "servant" as the NRSV wrongly translates), Ruth replies.

Now if she stopped there, and waited for Boaz's response, she would have done what Naomi had asked. But this is Ruth. She is the woman who gave her life for her mother-in-law, the woman who risked life and reputation to glean in a field of a man she did not know, the woman who came to the threshing floor at midnight with that same near stranger at great risk

Naomi had given Ruth unambiguous instructions: beautify yourself, go to the threshing floor, surrender yourself at his feet, and let Boaz do what he pleases (Ruth 3:3–4).

Although Ruth agrees to these instructions, she uses these instructions as a guideline, not a command to be followed explicitly. She says to Boaz, "*Spread your cloak over your handmaid*" (Ruth 3:9). The scene has sexual overtones. However, a man spreading his cloak over a woman in Jewish culture really meant that Ruth is proposing marriage to Boaz. What a surprise! What an unexpected role reversal! Delightfully, Ruth artfully uses Boaz's own word, translated earlier as "wing" (*canaph*), read here as "cloak," suggesting quite directly that "God's wing" in this instance is in a very human reality Boaz's cloak. (1)

Boaz is flattered and not angered by Ruth's directness. It appears in this scene that Boaz even boasts respect for Ruth, especially in light of understanding her circumstances.

Boaz and Ruth spend the night together on the threshing floor. Now there is nothing in the text that is spicy. It is a mystery about what happened. However, this midnight meeting in the barn is clearly dangerous, since Ruth arises to leave before the sun is up (Ruth 3:14).

She calls him to fulfill his duty as the *goel*. A *goel* is a close male relative who is obligated in Israelite law to redeem his kin who have fallen onto hard times. (Leviticus 25:25, 35-38, 47-49).2

But Boaz tells her there is another male relative that is first in line in the family of Elimilech and his sons.

Boaz promises that he will do all that Ruth asks. Her faithfulness to her mother-in-law is matched by Boaz's own faithfulness. This foreign widow mirrors God's own faithful love, God's *hesed*. Boaz says, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty (*hesed*) is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich" (Ruth 3:10). Ruth has chosen apparently older Boaz and they find new life in each other.

What can we learn from this story? This story reminds us of the vulnerability of women in many parts of the world, even today. Naomi and her daughters had no hope on their own. We are called to advocate for women and girls and empower them. In a sermon on this text, Rev. Marci Glass reminds us of the prejudice Ruth would have experienced. Whether it is stated out loud in this text or not, the truth remains, we have prejudices against people.

Because they are foreign.

Because they don't speak our language.

Because they look different than we do.

Because their names sound odd in our ears.

Because they are poor.

Because they need help.

Because because because. (2)

There is a tension in Scripture over this issue. There are commands not to marry foreigners. There are reminders that if you marry them, you better not worship their false gods. There are chapters and verses all about keeping separate, keeping pure, and keeping away from "them".

As much as we want to keep separate, and not welcome, the stranger because of their differences, we also have to deal with Ruth. She becomes the great grandmother of King David. *Because if it weren't for her, King David wouldn't have been born.* It is as if every time we decide who is in and who is out, God comes along and invites someone else to join the party. God makes us care about the widows and the people on the margins by putting them smack dab in the middle of our family tree.

In chapter one, Ruth had said to Naomi – "Your people will be my people." Now I hear her saying, "there is no longer us and them. There is no longer my people and your people. We are all each other's people." Her next line is "your God is my God." When we sign up for Naomi's God, for the God we worship and serve, we become a part of God's family. And if God wants to welcome Moabites to the family, who are we to tell them to go back to "their" people?

We are called to love. bell hooks writes:

"Individuals who choose to love can and do alter our lives in ways that honor the primacy of a love ethic. We do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire and respect; by

committing to give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet. Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions.”

The Book of Ruth lays out a love ethic too. **Your people will be my people.** It’s a book that refuses to let tribalism win. And although a patriarchal system was in place regarding power and land, the Book of Ruth also points the way where women take action to secure their future. Power over their bodies, their need for food, their relationships with the women and men in their lives.

Are we willing to lean in to love? To welcome and help people from Moabs of today? Are we willing to see and work to change the systems that oppress women and men because of the color of their skin? Are we willing to help people climb out of poverty? Are we willing to say and act in ways that model women and men sharing roles in the family and society and the church? To live into love is not easy. “It’s all that easy and it’s all that hard.” (3) Amen.

1) <https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/fully-a-womans-tale-john-c-holbert-11-02-2015?p=2>

2) Rev. Marci Glass, “Each Other’s People,” 10/12/10
<https://marciglass.com/2019/10/12/each-others-people/>

3) Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow
<https://breyeschow.medium.com/after-25-years-im-changing-my-charge-and-benediction-2b6a94415216>