

Hungry in the House of Bread: Redeeming Love

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Ruth 3

“Welcome to the courthouse on this amazing day,” 17th Circuit Court Family Division Judge Patricia Gardner said as she opened a hearing during the Kent County court’s annual Adoption Day Thursday on December 5. Thirty-seven children, all coming from the foster care system, were adopted on Adoption Day Thursday in Kent County. There wasn’t a dry eye in the courthouse. “That’s so true,” Judge Gardner said. “On Adoption Day, there are so many emotional stories of how children come to families.”

One of those families included Michael Clark Jr. and his new mom and dad, who had been his foster parents for about a year. On Thursday, they became his forever parents. During the proceedings Michael expressed love for his new mom and dad, for his teacher and also for the kindergarten class he was a part of, a class he considered to be family. Dozens of Michael’s kindergarten classmates from Wealthy Elementary in East Grand Rapids were present to help Michael celebrate this very special day. Many of you, I think, already know about this story (perhaps including the fact that Judge Gardner is a member of this congregation). What’s best about this wonderful story is that it’s obviously love that carries it along. When Michael’s classmates, as his case was being considered—held up dozens of paper hearts on sticks at the back of the courtroom in support of him, they were saying something far beyond what they themselves could fully grasp. Those wobbly paper hearts were saying—love carries this story. Michael’s love for his teacher and friends and parents. And of course their love, particularly his parents love for him. In that Kent County courtroom, on Adoption Day Thursday, love carried the day while dozens of paper hearts declared the message that, indeed, it’s that love carries all our most important stories along, including our story today. Reading from Ruth chapter 3, leaves little doubt that love is what’s carrying this story along. I know for a fact that some of you are already wondering—what in the world is happening in this story? And you’re also wondering how I’m going to talk about what’s happening—in church, from the pulpit!

Well—first of all let me affirm that if you’re thinking there’s a whole lot of romantic—even erotic tension going on in Ruth chapter 3, you are absolutely right. As I said—love carries our story along today. But the question is—what kind of love? What kind of love holds the strongest sway? I’ll remind you here that the book of Ruth begins with emptiness, with Naomi taking on bitterness as her very identity, believing God has turned against her. Last week, in Chapter 2 we saw the impact and importance of kindness—of extra kindness—in the story that’s unfolding—between Naomi and Ruth and Boaz.

And now in Ruth 3, a fire’s been lit. The temperature on the threshing floor is rising and we have a burning love story on our hands. But in order to understand the contours of that love, we’ll need to dig a little. So back to the story.

Perhaps as we read Chapter 3, you noticed that Naomi is sort of returning to life again. The kindness shown to her and Ruth seems to have kindled enough hope in Naomi for her to make a plan—a plan not for her own flourishing, but for Ruth’s. Naomi knows the only viable option for Ruth’s future security is the one she prayed for on their journey back to Bethlehem; for Ruth to find rest in the home of another husband. But this is a complicated matter. You see, in that patriarchal society, usually men, fathers or brothers, make arrangements for marriages. And even if Ruth had a man to speak for her, she had no bargaining power, no dowry, no social or political connection in this foreign place to make her an attractive catch.

But Ruth did have this—and so did Naomi—they both had in them the kind of love that carries this story along. It’s called redeeming love. And one of the contours of redeeming love is that it works for the freedom and flourishing of another person. You see, the plan Naomi is weaving is all for Ruth. Her thinking, and planning, and efforts will help secure a future for this daughter-in-law she’s come to fiercely love. And Ruth—her carrying out of the plan is for Naomi. So that Elimelech, Naomi’s dead husband’s, name and land will not disappear. It is redeeming love that’s burning brightest inside Naomi and Ruth, and it first came to them from somewhere else.

Last week Rev Jonker mentioned God’s hesed, God’s faithful, gracious, covenant kindness to us. Well, God’s hesed and God’s redeeming love are closing aligned because what they both entail is an active, selfless, sacrificial kind of caring that does for someone what they cannot do for themselves.

Today, already in this service, as always, we have acknowledged God’s redeeming love for us. In confession—we make ourselves vulnerable before God and name the things we cannot do on our own. We confess that we are fearful, that there are circumstances in our lives that make us afraid. Our bodies, our financial security, our relationships, sometimes seem so fragile, and they are. We confess that we are broken—that we can’t seem to shake our addiction to things like social media or other people’s praise or to substances that numb life’s harsh realities. We confess feeling weary and sad, and maybe even bitter sometimes. We confess identifying with Naomi when she imagined God’s hand had turned against her.

But as you know God hears our cries and responds to our frailties by assuring us—“I see you. I know your helplessness. Your sin, your sadness, your grief, your circumstances, and even your bitterness cannot change anything about my love for you. I have already done for you what you cannot do for yourself, and soon I will show you more clearly the power of my redeeming love.

Well friends, the thread of that redeeming love becomes even more clear as Naomi's plan unfolds. We haven't yet thought much about Boaz in our story. You know, Boaz in the book of Ruth is clearly a man of wealth and stature and power. And though our Western minds have also made him out to be some tall, dark, handsome, eligible bachelor, what the writer most wants us to know about Boaz is that he's honorable. Along with his wealth and rank and power he has the utmost respect of the entire community. Which is important to note as the scene on the threshing floor starts to steam up.

Back at Naomi's place Ruth is changing her clothes (likely setting aside the garments indicating she was a grieving widow), and getting soaped and perfumed for a close encounter with Boaz.

It's helpful to realize that Naomi's specific instructions to Ruth take into account the way the threshing floor usually runs at night. The workers at the end of a hard day of harvesting would eat and drink together right there amidst their harvested goods. Afterward some would find their way to a comfy spot to sleep while others shifted their attention to the women (likely vulnerable women) who came to spend time with the lonely harvesters—if you know what I mean. But, Naomi's prediction about where to find Boaz was right. And so after he had settled into sleep, Ruth did what Naomi told her to do. She snuck to where Boaz was sleeping and lay down near him. A Harlequin Romance novel would have a field day with this scene. Low lighting. Two eligible people. Passion that's been building. Ruth's heart pounding in anticipation of what will happen when she makes her next move.

I don't read Harlequin novels but I suspect it's not typical that as passion builds in a romance—the uncovering of someone's feet figures prominently. But that's what Ruth does. And it eventually wakes Boaz – who at first doesn't fully get what's happening either. Until Ruth says who she is, calls herself his servant and says—Spread your cloak over for me—which has more meaning than what it sounds.

When Ruth asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her, in the Hebrew it read—Take me under your wing. And that phrase is significant. You might remember that in Chapter 2 when Boaz was affirming Ruth's goodness to Naomi he blessed her by saying, “May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” And so now, what Boaz comes to understand is that Ruth is inviting him to act on his words of blessing by marrying her.

And then wise Ruth adds to her request by reminding Boaz that he was the guardian (or kinsman) redeemer of the family, which means that Boaz is someone who has responsibility to buy back land after a family member has lost it. And because that responsibility isn't typically a beneficial thing for the kinsman redeemer, we can see that Ruth puts at risk the marriage that would benefit her by tying it to the land that Naomi needs. But Boaz too, has the flame of redeeming love burning inside. And so Boaz lives up to his character and does what he claims the God of Israel does; he gives sheltering care to both Ruth and Naomi. And in doing so, Boaz declares and demonstrates to them and to us— the amazing, self-sacrificing, redeeming love of God.

Friends, we believe Advent is a time to face fearlessly our need for the light of God's redeeming love in our lives and world. It's also a time to wonder how we ourselves might shine that light for others. It could be as big as taking a child out of the foster system for a forever home or as big as taking off a football jersey. It might be as small as helping your parents do some of the hard things they do for you. But in the hands of our great Redeemer, all these things carry along the good news that our redemption is on its way.

At the end of Chapter 3, when Boaz plans for Ruth's safe morning exit from the threshing floor, Boaz sends Ruth off with a love offering for her and for Naomi. I want you to picture this gift with me. The author says it's 6 measures of barley. And we don't really know how much that is, but this we know: That what Ruth carries home to Naomi from Boaz, keeps growing. What started out as 1 measure earlier in the story has grown to six. I can imagine Ruth holding this bundle of barley in her arms as if it were a bundle of joy—maybe even the bundle of a baby boy. And that's not to crazy to imagine because certainly there is a baby boy in Ruth's future.

Which leads to a baby boy in ours as well. The baby boy in our future came to earth from heaven to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He took on our frail human flesh, our sin, our brokenness, and on the cross redeemed it, declaring that God has not turned against us.

You know, those precious little paper hearts the students held on Adoption Day Thursday will one day fade and fall apart. But the eternal story and plan of the One who carries all our faltering stories cannot be shaken—and under his sheltering wings you and I will find our refuge and strength—today and forevermore. Thanks be to God. Amen.