

Women of the Genealogy: Ruth

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Ruth 1:8-21, 4:13-17

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, so today we will reflect on the story of the third woman of Matthew's genealogy and that's Ruth. Ruth's story is set in the time of the Judges; a time in Israel's history of great political instability and uncertainty. A time when everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes. If you go back and read the book of Judges, you will know it was a chaotic time. During these turbulent times a woman named Naomi immigrates to Moab with her family. There is a famine in the land and so she leaves her ancestral home in Bethlehem and heads to Moab with her husband and her two sons. While they're there, her sons meet and marry two Moabite women whose names were Ruth and Orpah.

That's when things start to go terribly wrong. Naomi's husband dies, which is bad enough. But then her two sons die as well and Naomi is left alone with her two daughters-in-law. A loss like this would be sad for us today, but for Naomi it's a catastrophe. In those days when you lost your sons and your husband you didn't just lose people; you lost all your financial resources. Without children and grandchildren, and particularly without male children and grandchildren, your prospects were grim. For most women in that situation they have a choice between begging and prostitution. Naomi is destitute in a foreign country, far away from her home and this is what she decides to do. Read Ruth 1:8-21

"Don't call me Naomi anymore, call me Mara." I think you know what the name Mara means, right? It means bitter. But did you see the footnote in your Bible about what Naomi means? It means 'pleasant' or 'sweet' as in 'she has a sweet disposition.' Naomi is describing her sadness for the women of Bethlehem by playing on her own name: "Don't call me sweet anymore; call me bitter." Sadness isn't just a feeling I have; it's who I am.

You can understand why she says it. By the end of the chapter 1, all of her gauges are on empty. Her financial gauge is empty; she has nothing, the family inheritance, their portion in the land in Bethlehem doesn't belong to them anymore. Her family gauge is empty; she has no husband and no sons to support her, and she's too old to remarry and have more children. And her faith gauge is empty. It's not that she doesn't believe in God; it's more that she no longer trusts him "The Lord has afflicted me; the almighty has brought this misfortune on me." Naomi's grief is so bad, she's become unrecognizable. When the women of the town see her they say, "Naomi, is that you?" Her grief has changed her physical appearance. Loss can do that to a person. Have you known a person who's experienced a loss or stress so profound that it changes their physical appearance? That's Naomi.

So Ruth chapter 1 paints us a picture of this empty woman weeping on the road. That picture raises the question that drives the rest of the book. That question is: is there any hope for Naomi? It's kind of an Advent question when you think about it. Is there hope for this empty, broken woman who's just about given up?

Here's how the rest of the story goes. Naomi talks as if she has lost everything, but that's not quite true. Naomi still has Ruth. As we heard in our reading, Ruth refuses to leave her Mother-in-law. She clings to her. Even though she's a Moabite, and even though she knows that people in Israel hate the Moabites, she makes an unconditional promise to Naomi: "I am not going to leave you. Where you go I will go! Your God will be my God. Your people will be my people. Whatever you face, I am going to be right there beside you."

Ruth proves true to her word. They go back to Bethlehem, and as soon as they get back, Ruth goes out into the fields to glean so that she and her Mother-in-law can have some food. She spends a long hot day in the barley fields picking up the grain that drops from the harvester's sheaves. For Ruth this isn't just hard work; it's dangerous. Because she's from Moab she could face assault or abuse. Nevertheless, she does this hard and dangerous thing for her Mother-in-law.

As “luck” would have it, she ends up gleaning in a person’s field who is a relative of her deceased Father-in-law. His name is Boaz. Boaz is kind to Ruth. He tells his men, “Don’t bother that young woman. Let her glean.” He tells his men, “While you’re at it, drop some extra grain stalks out of the sheaves for her.” He tells Ruth, “Hey you’re welcome to get a drink of water from our water jars any time you want.” At lunchtime, he says to her, “Hey, why don’t you join us for dinner. Here. Have some of our bread.” By the time she’s done gleaning, Ruth is waddling home with 30 pounds of grain in her shawl. When she gets home she dumps the grain in front of an astonished Naomi. “Girlfriend! Where did you glean!?” Ruth tells her about Boaz and for the first time something like a smile shows up on Naomi’s face. “Boaz! He’s our relative. Keep working in his field! He will take care of you!” And so Ruth does.

Weeks later, the harvest is coming to an end, and which means Ruth’s time with Boaz is ending. So Naomi hatches a plan. She says to Ruth, “Wash and perfume yourself, get a pedicure and put on a party dress. The men will be winnowing tonight and sleeping on the threshing floor. So after they’ve settled down for the night, go down to the threshing floor where Boaz is sleeping. Lie down at his feet, take the blanket off of him so that he wakes up. When he wakes up, see what happens.” It’s quite a request.

Ruth follows Naomi’s request. She puts on her party dress and goes down to the threshing floor. She finds Boaz snoring away, and she lies down at his feet, uncovers him, and waits. Boaz wakes up wondering why he’s so cold and who stole his blanket. But then he looks beside him and sees this beautiful sweet smelling woman...who promptly proposes to him. That’s what Ruth does. She essentially says, ‘will you marry me.’ There’s a romantic dimension to Ruth’s proposal, but there’s also a practical dimension. Ruth wants Boaz to be their guardian redeemer. A guardian redeemer is a person appointed by law to reclaim the lost property of a relative who has died, giving it back to the family of the deceased so that they can have a livelihood again. In this case Ruth is asking Boaz not only to redeem the property, but also to take her along with it. To marry her so that she and Naomi can have support.

When he sees who it is and realizes that this isn’t a dream, Boaz accepts Ruth’s offer. He says to her, “Ruth, this is great! I promise I will absolutely marry you, but first I’ve got to talk to go to a few people. There’s another man in town who is an even closer relative, and he might want to redeem your-Father-in-law’s old land. He’s got first dibs and I’ve got to deal with him. But I promise I’ll do it.”

Boaz is true to his word. The next day he goes to the city gate, which functions like the local court, and before the city officials he asks the other relative if he wants to redeem Naomi’s land, to buy it back for the family. The man says, yeah sure! For a second it looks like the marriage will be off. But then Boaz says, if you want the land, you also have to marry Ruth. The other relative says, “Hang on! No one said anything about a wife. I’m out.” And so Boaz steps in. He buys the land, he gets the girl, and this is how the story ends. Read Ruth 4:13-17

“Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him.” I love that picture and I love it because of how it contrasts with the picture at the beginning. She’s not empty anymore; she’s full. She’s not Mara anymore, she is Naomi; her life is once again sweet and pleasant. There’s so much we can say about his story, but I want to start by talking about the things that saved Naomi in this story. At the beginning of this story, Naomi’s life is a mess, it’s coming apart. Through the course of the story God uses two things to hold her together and turn her around. I want to look at these two things because I think they give us a pretty good idea about how to love each other well, how to secure each other’s lives in times of crisis.

First, Naomi is secured by promises. In this story there are two promises that come around Naomi and shore her up and keep her life from collapsing. The first promise is the promise of Ruth. “Mom, I’m not going to leave you! Don’t bother trying to send me away. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.” Naomi’s life is spiraling down, but when Ruth makes and keeps that promise, it stops the descent. The second promise is the promise Boaz makes. It’s a promise made to Ruth, but it’s a promise for both Ruth and Naomi. “I will redeem! I promise!”

A promise is a powerful thing. A promise is one of love’s most powerful forms. Lew Smedes says this about promises: “when a person makes a promise, she stretches herself out into circumstances that no one

can control and controls at least one thing: she will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.” That’s exactly what Ruth’s promise does for Naomi; it’s an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

And that’s what we do for each other when we make strong promises. When we make strong promises to people who are sinking, we put solid ground under their feet. Sometimes when a person is struggling we pastors will ask that person, ‘who are your people?’ What do we mean when we say that? We’re asking: Who are the foundational people in your life? Who are the people who are there for you? Who are the people who have made a version of Ruth’s promise to you? I will be here for you no matter what. Maybe they did it verbally. Maybe they made that promise non-verbally, through their actions over time. Either way, in crisis, they are the people you lean on. When you are sinking their presence is like a foothold. Everyone needs those people. If you don’t have those people in your life, you are struggling.

The flipside is also true: all of us need to be that person for others. All of us should be someone else’s people. If you can’t think of whose people you are, maybe your love is spread too thin. Maybe you are clutching your life too close to your chest. God gave you your life so you could share it.

The second thing that lifts Naomi is kindness. Human kindness. And I would define kindness as an act of blessing that gives another person more than they deserve or expect. Ruth is a book full of people who do kind things for each other. And all these kindnesses are food that God uses to slowly fill Naomi’s empty life. The first 15 verses of the book of Ruth are a kind of wilderness; it’s all famine loss and the time of the judges. But then at the end of chapter 1 and then again throughout the rest of the book, kindness begins to spring up in the wilderness.

It starts with Ruth’s kindness to her Mother-in-law. That’s the first sprout of kindness, and it creates a kind of momentum. Pretty soon the wilderness is bursting into bloom. Boaz hears about what Ruth has done for Naomi so he gives her protection in his fields, and then he gives her water and extra grain. Ruth shows kindness to Naomi by risking herself by coming to the threshing floor and proposing to Boaz. Boaz shows kindness by accepting the proposal and acting to make it happen. Read chapter two and you can’t miss it. Kindness sprouts and grows and flowers through the whole chapter.

One of my favorite verses in chapter two is verse 4. It’s a simple verse. Boaz arrives in the fields, “The Lord be with you,” he says to his laborers. To which they reply, “The Lord bless you!” Doesn’t seem like there’s much going on there, so why do I like it? Because it gives you a sense of the Spirit of Boaz’s farm. When Boaz and his laborers greet each other like that, we can see that Boaz’s field is a place of blessing where God’s kindness flows. It reminds me of the blessing at the beginning of our worship services. You come into church and sit down, and the presiding minister raises their hands over you and says, “Grace, Mercy and Peace to you from God the Father and from Christ his son.” It says to you, “Welcome! This family is a field of blessing where God’s kindness flows.” We all want to be in fields like that. We all need to be in fields like that. We need to be in communities of people who make and keep promises, and show us kindness. If we live in that kind of community, we will flourish. If we don’t live in that kind of community, if we don’t have those people in our life, we struggle.

Kindness and promises. These are simple everyday things. Anyone can do them. They are not miraculous. That’s actually one of the interesting things about this story: it’s a redemption story, but there are no miracles. No seas are parted; no manna rains down from the sky. Instead God uses ordinary, household acts of human caring to save Naomi’s life.

Of course God does much more than that. You can read the book of Ruth all the way to verse 17 and think, “Oh this is just a nice, romantic story about a woman who got the grandson she never thought she’d have and a lovely Moabite girl who found love on the threshing floor.” But verse 17 blows the roof off this story. They named the child Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. As in King David. And then you realize: God isn’t just using these promises and these small acts of kindness to save Naomi, he’s preserving the line of the covenant. God isn’t just saving Naomi through these promises and kindness, he’s paving the

way for the coming of his Son. God isn't just using human these promises and this kindness to save Naomi; he's using it to save the world!

And remember: this is happening at the time of the Judges, that period of political chaos. That time when everyone did what was right in their own eyes, that period when it felt like the world order was coming apart. But in the middle of that God is at work preserving his people, and how does he do it? Through small campfires of ordinary people who do the basic work of caring for each other and loving each other well. Little communities of promise making and kindness and hope. Little communities of persistent faith.

You see, it turns out that the most significant things in this world are not always what gets published in the newspapers. The world wasn't paying attention to Boaz's little field. Outside, kings were plotting, nations were raging, and people were doing whatever was right in their own eyes. Meanwhile in her kitchen Naomi is holding Obed in her arms and a power and a love that is stronger than all that stuff is taking hold, a love that the powers don't understand, a love that will change the world. It kind of reminds you of another birth that happened in Bethlehem, doesn't it?

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