

Ruth | Tenderness in the Midst of Brutality

“Redemption and Significance”

Ruth CH 4.1-12

12.22.19

Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there, and behold, the close relative of whom Boaz spoke was passing by, so he said, "Turn aside, friend, sit down here." And he turned aside and sat down. ² He took ten men of the elders of the city and said, "Sit down here." So they sat down. ³ Then he said to the closest relative, "Naomi, who has come back from the land of Moab, has to sell the piece of land which belonged to our brother Elimelech. ⁴ "So I thought to inform you, saying, 'Buy it before those who are sitting here, and before the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if not, tell me that I may know; for there is no one but you to redeem it, and I am after you.'" And he said, "I will redeem it." ⁵ Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance." ⁶ The closest relative said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, because I would jeopardize my own inheritance. Redeem it for yourself; you may have my right of redemption, for I cannot redeem it."

⁷ Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning the redemption and the exchange of land to confirm any matter: a man removed his sandal and gave it to another; and this was the manner of attestation in Israel. ⁸ So the closest relative said to Boaz, "Buy it for yourself." And he removed his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰ "Moreover, I have acquired Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon, to be my wife in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance, so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his birth place; you are witnesses today." ¹¹ All the people who were in the court, and the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. ¹² "Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman."

We've been looking at The Book of Ruth for the last few weeks (our 2019 Advent Series) and in some ways we've reached the PEAK and are coming in for a landing... almost to "happily-ever-after" part BUT there ARE some significant loose ends.

In the background there's this ancient practice (which SEEMS odd to us) but was a provision of God's care for the vulnerable in the ancient world, a provision known as "levirate marriage". A childless widow is able to marry her (deceased) husband's brother or the closest relative. That

“redeemer” obligates himself to father sons for the widow in the name of the deceased, sons who can care for and protect her in old age. Mercy.

At this point in the story, the old widow, Naomi has returned from the land of Moab (childless) with her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabitess (the young widow). And a relative has volunteered! The righteous man, Boaz has cared for Ruth and agreed to redeem her and be her husband, preserve the family line/standing.

But Boaz knows that there IS another relative, closer on the family tree. This man is more obliged AND has the first right of refusal... We haven't heard from this “closer relative” but Boaz insists on settling this claim before marrying Ruth... What will happen?

The redeemer must be willing to surrender his own name to raise sons in the name of the deceased. The son of Ruth (the widow) will be thought of as Mahlon's son. It's a great sacrifice for the redeemer – to lose his own name for a deceased relative.

Today, we consider significance. What does it mean to “make a name for yourself” (Gen 11.4)? What does it mean to lose your name? What does it mean – in the eyes of the world and IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD – to become significant OR insignificant? How does being redeemed lead to a life that matters? Let's look at:

- 1) The OTHER Redeemer – Joe Shmoe
- 2) The REAL Redeemer – Whose Name We Know
- 3) Can I Get a Witness? – Away We Go!

The other redeemer seems like the logical and LAWFUL choice. He was “closer” related to Elimelech than Boaz was. But for some reason the man has NOT come forward. The whole town – Little Town of Bethlehem – was abuzz with news of Naomi's return so he knew she was in need and knew he could help them but... silence.

So Boaz waits for him at the Gate of the City where judgments were rendered. And, the closer relative just happens to show up (like Ruth happened on the field of Boaz). And Boaz, waiting, calls to him. Our translation is inaccurate: it's not “turn aside FRIEND” but in Hebrew, “pelsoni almoni” which linguistic experts call a “farrago”. It's a figure of speech using two rhyming non-sense words like “helter-skelter” or “hocus-pocus” OR... more pertinent: Joe Shmoe.

And the writer using this figure of speech is saying, “This was just some guy” like “what's his name?” – a man of no particular SIGNIFICANCE.

And when asked, with ten witnesses present, “do you want to buy this field that belonged to your relative so it stays in the family?” Joe Shmoe says, “Sure!” (Source of income and probably at a good price – an estate sale!)

But when it comes to marrying Ruth the Moabitess (like hepatitis – a disease to be avoided!) – “will you marry Ruth the Moabitess to raise up the name of the deceased Mahlon on his inheritance?” (Suspense!!)

Suddenly this redeemer can't redeem. He says it twice, “I cannot redeem”. It would mean this land would go to Ruth's first son in the NAME of Mahlon. It will NOT profit Joe Shmoe – it'll hurt his portfolio! I think that's what he means: “it'll jeopardize MY inheritance!”

This guy is acting solely on the profit-motive. “Will this enhance my portfolio?” And the truth IS: he's NOT strictly bound by the Law to marry Ruth (he's NOT the “levir”, the brother of Mahlon); he's within his rights and he does indeed cling to those rights.

“Boaz, this is all yours!” and his name is Joe Shmoe.

So, Boaz (probably thinking, “I thought so!”) Boaz says, in front of all these witnesses. “Hey, let's make this official! Gimme your sandals showing publically that I will NOW walk in your shoes – take your obligations upon myself and no turning back!” So he does!

Now IF there is a parallel here to our own modern spiritual lives... it MAY be the presence of OTHER redeemers who seem logical and lawful but cannot redeem! I've mentioned this fantastic book by David Zahl (Z-a-h-l) called, *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics and Romance Became Our new Religion and What to Do About It.*

It's really a book about OTHER redeemers and how they all have to say with our Joe Shmoe, “I cannot redeem”. But they all SEEM so promising.

As people have turned from organized religion, they have a huge, vacuous hole in their lives and they (WE) are cranking up the importance and priority of (what used to be normal pursuits) and filling them with a level of importance that can only be described as religious. We used to say, “Oh, he waxes his car religiously” but now we do everything religiously!

We CRAM our schedules with so much stuff because being busy is a sign that we are... (wait for it...) that we are significant. Busy people are important people and the busier we are (even in the church – even as a minister!) the busier we are the more the “rivers of affirmation and reward (keep) flowing in our direction. We are afraid they will stop if WE'RE not generating the current. No wonder so many of us wear our exhaustion as a badge of honor. Complaining of being “crazy busy” may be today's definitive #humblebrag.” (p.5)

See... we have the idea that being redeemed means that we make a break with sin (and that's right) but it also means exposing and breaking with our other redeemers, our “functional saviors”. And to paraphrase the old Puritan writer, Stephen Charnock, “People are more willing to part with their SIN than to part with their righteousness.” Those “good things” in our lives

that promise to make us significant and give us a NAME... they can be the very things that are impeding or KILLING us spiritually.

David Zahl suggests we look at: Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics and Romance as areas where we are clinging with religious fervor to false redeemers that like Joe Shmoe “cannot redeem”.

They cannot contain us, cannot define us and cannot carry us. They can’t keep their promises and they cannot make us truly significant/glorious as God intends us to be. That requires a Real Redeemer.

Boaz is the one in this passage. Three-thousand years later and we still know his name (the other guy: what’s HIS name?). Boaz, in the name of love and in the power of God’s grace, God’s covenant loyalty (“hesed” in Hebrew) Boaz is motivated NOT simply by what the Law requires – he knows the hesed/grace of God and therefore he’s able to give up his rights and his frenetic attempts at making a name for himself.

At the Tower of Babel (Gen 11) they were fixated on making a name for themselves and it was and IS a disaster. But Boaz who knows the grace of God is able to entrust himself to God. It’s as if he says, “Lord, my name is in YOUR HANDS and I want to do what YOU COUNT to be significant... not just what’s legal or permissible but what I see in You! Having received Your grace – I want to be gracious and kind and wildly generous to others!”

And that motivation leads Boaz to “do all things well” (Mk 7.37) for the sake of his Beloved, Ruth. He doesn’t want to do a half-baked job that will leave her insecure. He loses his life and paradoxically FINDS it. That’s how true significance comes about in the Kingdom of God!

And of course, Boaz (whose name we remember!) is a pointer to THE Redeemer of all God’s people, Jesus Christ. Out of love and out of joy (the joy of having His Beloved Bride, the Church) Jesus Christ did all that was necessary to redeem us. Like Boaz, he didn’t seem to be the logical choice to redeem us. He didn’t come as a conquering hero but as a servant, a poor Baby born in Bethlehem (where today’s story took place) and when He had lived (not simply in some sort of rigid compliance with the Law) but delighted to do all His Father’s will, always from the heart like it was His food to love and obey the Father (Jn 4.34, 17.4).

Then, emptying Himself and becoming a Servant, He lost all His rights and submitted to the Cross and was counted totally insignificant. His name was soiled in the extreme and He was considered a criminal with a bad name – He went, like Boaz, outside the city to the place of judgment, before a jury of His people and the Judge was judged in our place...to redeem.

And yet, God the Father bestowed on Him the Name above every name. It’s the Name to whom everyone will eventually bow; it’s the Name we know!

To trust Jesus Christ, seems to be the path to insignificance. You give up your rights and you give up YOUR own efforts to make a name for yourself.

You begin to scrutinize these false redeemers and see that they can't redeem. If you look to be the perfect parent in order to make a name for yourself, it won't happen – parenting can't redeem you... neither can career or any other good thing.

In the end, the CHORUS chimes in. The jury and all the people pronounce this three-fold blessing on Boaz. They give witness to the power of God's "hesed" in the man's life and in this family.

They invoke the witness of Scripture and the history of God's work in past generations. They mention Rachel and Leah who built the House of Israel, women who parented NOT to make themselves a name (weren't redeemed by their parenting – but trusted God's promises to make their lives AND their parenting significant – AND He did!) – “may Ruth be like they were, trusting the grace/promises of God!”

They mention Tamar (Gen 38) – a Gentile woman (like Ruth!) who believed the Promises of God and did some crazy stuff in order to cling to God and His promises for her and her family! (Another Levirate Marriage)

And the Chorus, the witnesses at the gate, celebrate the pattern in Scripture – “whoever loses his life, whoever leaves his/her name in God's hands/promises – that person finds life and becomes truly significant.”

The witnesses celebrate Boaz. He was used as an agent of God's grace (hesed) to Ruth. Many here would be able to point to a person who spread his or her wings over you and it was, to you, as if God's own arms were over you. Boaz said (2.12) “YHWH, the God of Israel under whose wings you seek refuge” and in the next CH. Ruth asks Boaz, “cover me with your wings” (same word, 3.9) – in other words, Boaz was God's human agent, a messenger of grace and refuge.

And this is so often the case with those who come to the real Redeemer – He uses a human friend, a mentor or fellow believer to extend His grace.

In fact, this chorus of witnesses (along with the women's song in the final scene) reminds us all that we are redeemed individually but it always brings us into the company of “the witnesses”, the Church, the community of God's people. We are the Redeemer's Chorus of witnesses.

We're called to celebrate His redemption and keep reminding one another of His grace and promises and this ultimate Redeemer whose Name we know – the One born in Bethlehem who lived, died and rose from death to buy us back and to make a name FOR us (Rev 2.17, 22.4) to make our lives truly significant, beyond what we imagine as no other redeemer could.