

7-28-24 sermon - Ruth chapter 4

NRSV (1-8, 18-22); Dr Wil Gafney (9-17)

A reading from the Book of Ruth, the entirety of chapter four.

Listen again for a word from God.

No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there, than the kin-redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, "You there, come, sit down here." And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here"; so they sat down. He then said to the kin-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman, Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So the man said, "I will redeem it." Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance." At this, the kin-redeemer said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

Now, this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the kin-redeemer said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal.

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I am acquiring all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon from the hand of Naomi. Also, Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon am I acquiring for myself as a wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, to reestablish the name of the deceased on his heritable property, that it may not be cut off from his kin and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses."

All the women and men who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the FAITHFUL GOD grant that the woman who is coming into your house be like Rachel and Leah; the two of them built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephrathah and establish a lineage in Bethlehem; and may your house, through the children that the FOUNT OF LIFE will give you by this young woman, be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar gave birth to for Judah. So Boaz took Ruth as his own for a wife. He came to her and the SOURCE OF LIFE granted her a pregnancy, and she gave birth to a son.

Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the FAITHFUL GOD, who has not deprived you this day of next-of-kin; and may the child's name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a provider in your latter years; for your daughter-in-law has given birth to him, she who loves you, she who is more to you than seven sons." Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and she fostered him. The neighbor-women 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.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

Holy wisdom, holy word. Thanks be to God.

This week we reach the conclusion of the Book of Ruth. This gripping story, told over four chapters, of these two women, Naomi and Ruth. The chapter begins with Boaz positioning himself at the city gates, waiting for the unnamed relative who has first refusal to act as a kin-redeemer. The author wants to waste no time getting into the action, because as Boaz sits, the man in question walks by. Now, if you're following along in the pew bible, Boaz calls out to his relative, saying, "Come over, friend; sit down here." But the more accurate translation is, "You there, come, sit down here." Again, a reminder that bible translators make decisions about what words to use, and often use words that soften the original meaning: e.g. "servant" instead of "slave"; "friend" instead of, "you there." This man is the closest relative of Boaz on Elimelech's side, yet he addresses him as one might a stranger whose name you don't know. Intriguing.

As the man sits down, Boaz calls over some of the village elders, and they sit down with them. From the events narrated in chapter three we know that Boaz's intention is to marry Ruth, yet he begins by talking about the sale of a piece of land belonging to his dead relative. And there's an element of tension, because it's quite possible that this unnamed relative is willing to redeem the land, to buy it from Naomi. Note that none of the elders question Naomi's right to sell the land. Apparently, there's nothing out of the ordinary happening here: a childless widow is forced to sell her only asset in order to survive. This sale is a matter for the other members of Elimelech's family, and, really, the closest family member should have already come forward to redeem the land, to keep it in the family. But now the matter is out in the open, and the unnamed relative agrees to take on the role of kin-redeemer and buy the land.

Now, even though we know that this is really all about *Ruth*, no one at the city gate does. As far as they're all concerned, this is a straightforward legal property transaction. Elimelech has no living sons, and Naomi is old, and highly unlikely to have any other children. So, even though the relative almost certainly understands that he will be responsible to care for Naomi, when she dies, the property will be his – making it a safe investment. Everyone's happy – the Law of Israel working just as it should.

But then Boaz drops the bombshell: "Redeem the land and you must redeem Ruth" – in order to keep the land in her deceased husband's name, as his inheritance. While it's usually unwise to make an argument from silence (to assume something has happened without proof that it has), it would appear that Naomi and Ruth have not tried to impose marriage on any of Elimelech's relatives under the Levirate Law of marriage. Which suggests they have no legal standing to do so. Probably because Ruth is a – a what? A Moabite, as Boaz identifies her here. Certainly the closer relative didn't believe they had a case for Levirate marriage, as he would surely have taken that into consideration before agreeing to redeem the land. The fact that he backs out as soon as he hears that marriage to Ruth and giving Mahlon a son is part of the deal supports that line of thought.

All of this begs the question: why does Boaz act as he does? It appears that even if he wants to marry Ruth, that's *all* he has to do. He doesn't have to redeem the land, or have a son in her dead husband's name. He could just marry her and take care of Naomi and her. So why *does* he do it? Because this kind of sacrificial act is one of – if not *the* – main themes of the book: *hesed* love – covenant loyalty.

We began the book with two sisters-in-law, one of whom clings to her mother-in-law in the face of disaster, the other who returns to her family. And now we have two kin-redeemers: one who backs out of his responsibility, the other who goes far beyond what is required of him. Both Ruth and Boaz are portrayed as people of integrity, of loyalty, people with honor, and always in view in this story is the fact that this couple are King David's great grandparents, as we heard earlier in the

genealogy which concludes the book. No one should be able to suspect the royal family of any underhand dealings to acquire property in the past. Because honor is central to life in the Ancient Near East. Boaz cannot simply marry Ruth and leave the question of Elimelech's land and name unanswered: that would dishonor the memory of his dead relative, and the family name. So, the beginning point of all this is the land, and as Boaz is a man of integrity, he has to make sure that the relative with the prior claim understands he has first refusal. If Boaz were to just marry Ruth and redeem the land anyway, that would cause an affront to this man, hence the interaction at the city gates. But we know that Boaz wants to go way beyond what the Law requires in caring for these two widows, so only when the business of the field is concluded can Boaz suddenly bring Ruth the Moabite into view. Perhaps with a prayer that his relative will *not* decide to act with the kind of excessive generosity and kindness that Boaz has towards them and thwart his own desires! After talking about Ruth did he hold his breath for a moment? If so, he needn't have worried. The unnamed relative withdraws his claim, and Boaz can breathe a sigh of relief.

And then there's the weird thing with giving the sandal.

This just tells us that the story was finally written down a long time after it happened. During a time, apparently, where people decided to find *other* ways to prove the legality of a property transaction, than pulling out a stinky sandal.

And with that, we can breathe a sigh of relief. Boaz's plan has worked. He will get to act as kin-redeemer, purchase the field from Naomi and provide for these two widows. AND he goes much further than the Law required by stating that he will also marry Ruth – “the Moabite,” just in case we'd forgotten – as he planned. And “re-establish the name” of her dead husband Mahlon on the land of his father, by – hopefully – having a son with Ruth who will go on to inherit the land and preserve Mahlon's name in the lineage. The name order of Naomi's sons suggests that Ruth was married to the younger, and in the patriarchal narratives, the younger brothers were always the unlikely heirs. Once again, the author is inviting us to compare this story with the foundational stories of Israel, doubling down on that by the women talking about Rachel and Leah, saying of them, “Who built up the house of Israel.” And – if you remember – Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah in the dark of the night, as was Judah, tricked by his daughter-in-law, Tamar, into giving him a son, Perez – who the women also name here. And Ruth, perhaps, *has* also “tricked” Boaz into marrying her in the dark of night. Whether that was the case or not, the author clearly wants to keep the matriarchs of Israel in view in the way he tells the story, which now reaches its happy resolution.

Boaz marries Ruth. Hers and Naomi's futures are secured, and a son is born! And what has been hinted at throughout the story is stated plainly: the God of Israel “enables Ruth to conceive”, and she gives birth to a son. It is the SOURCE OF LIFE, the FAITHFUL GOD who has been behind all that unfolded in the story, and now God has provided for these two women. And at the centre of it all is the love of this Moabite woman, her love for her mother-in-law, and her loyalty to Naomi. Her willingness to do whatever it takes to provide for her. Ruth has abundantly lived out her declaration that, “Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. And your God, my God.” Which the women of Bethlehem can also clearly see, saying to Naomi, “...for your daughter-in-law has given birth to a son, she who loves you, she who is more to you than seven sons.” Perhaps, again, the author is suggesting that Ruth is Naomi's imaginary “eighth son,” just as her great-grandson, David, will be the eighth son in his family.

But then the story ends in such a strange way.

It is, after all, the book of *Ruth*. But the son Ruth bears is given to *Naomi*, who becomes his nurse, the women declaring, "A son has been born to Naomi!" And *the women* name the child! Obed, "the one who serves." Then the book ends with a genealogy:

"Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron,
Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon,
Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David."

But this closing genealogy is not concerned with the person for whom the book is named! For this is Boaz and his family's genealogy, stretching back to Perez. And whose name is missing? Mahlon! Boaz declared that he was marrying Ruth to raise up a son for Mahlon so his name would endure, but it is Boaz who's listed as the father of Obed, not Mahlon. Just as Perez was listed as a son of Judah, whereas he should have been known as the son of *Er*, the dead husband of Tamar.

I suspect that only the history professors are still engaged with the story by this point! Some – if not many – of you are thinking, "This may all be very interesting, Sean, but so what?" (Which is the question preachers ultimately have to wrestle with in any text.) "So what? What does this ancient story that ends with a genealogy have to do with us, sitting here – or at home – today?" Well, perhaps it is the genealogy that provides an unlikely "so what?" For the book named for this Moabite woman, Ruth, begins, not with Ruth, but with Elimelech – a man whose name means, "God is King." And it ends, not with Ruth, but with David – a man who was God's anointed king. David – the one from whose line, God promised, the Messiah would come. A man who, no doubt, had many political enemies, quite happy to challenge his status because of his very dubious great-grandmother, Ruth, "the Moabite":

"How can there be a hereditary line of kings flowing from such a woman?"

"A Moabite!"

Well, the author of the Book of Ruth says, "Let me tell you her story, and you can decide if she's an appropriate ancestor in the long history of the people of God. You can decide if her story sounds any different than that of Isaac and Leah; of Jacob and Tamar, and of their children, whom we revere as our ancestors."

There's no question that there's all kinds of human intrigue in the story of Ruth. We run the full gamut of the human experience in just four chapters. We have questions about how people behave in the story, their actions, their motivations, promises made and kept. Promises made and apparently *not* kept. And one can make the argument that this is really the story of *Naomi*, and how God provided for her.

But, it's the Book of *Ruth*

The most unlikely person to be honored in such a way in the holy text of a people who despised Ruth's own people. And *that* is what lies at the heart of this book, and the heart of the story of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Or, perhaps, of Sarah, Leah and Tamar. That is what lies at the heart of the Gospels: Jesus calling the most unlikely people to be his disciples; eating at the most unlikely of tables; becoming friends with those who were often looked down upon, even despised. Caring for people like Naomi and Ruth – the widows, and orphans and migrants.

The least, and the least likely to be among the 'extras' at roll call for the story of God, let alone be the main characters.

So, the one thought that has lingered with me this week is this: all too often when people tell the story of their church, they divide it into chapters based on the pastors. "During Reverend so-and-so's tenure, such-and-such happened." So often we make the pastor the main character, a few of us are supporting characters: most are bit parts or extras in the drama. And perhaps that's true at times. More often than we care to admit, perhaps. But the Book of Ruth – and the witness of scripture – suggests that often the Story moves forward through the most unlikely characters. And so, I imagine, some of us are sitting next to a Ruth right now. Someone who has embodied God's faithful love and loyalty for years in this place. Someone who has seen pastors come and go, while they've continued to show up to tell Godly Play stories on Sundays; to pray on Mondays; to count the money on Tuesdays; to sing and ring in the choirs on Wednesdays; to read scripture together on Thursdays. To do "small things with great love" as Mother Teresa might say.

And so, while we pray for and anticipate the arrival of our next installed pastor – whenever, and whoever that person might be – let us be open to the unlikely people and the unlikely ways that God is going to continue the story of the Presbyterian Church of Danville. Let us more faithfully embody the kind of sacrificial love that is writ large in the Book of Ruth.

May it be so.