

This morning we will consider chapter 3 of the book of Ruth. In this part of the story Ruth proposes to Boaz. Even today, usually it is the guy who proposes. But in the days of Ruth and Boaz that was even more unusual – if it ever happened at all. But it did happen here. We will consider the story as it unfolds.

The initiative for Ruth's bold proposal came from Naomi. She comes up with a plan to get Boaz to become Ruth's husband. In the opening verses of the chapter she says to Ruth, "My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative...." The word "rest" here refers to Ruth having a husband. Back in chapter 1, when Naomi tried to convince both Orpah and Ruth to return to Moab, she had said to them, "The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband." As Daniel Block expresses it in his commentary on this passage, the term "rest" here "speaks of the security and tranquility that a woman in Israel longed for and expected to find in the home of a loving husband" (p.681).

We have seen earlier that from a human perspective Ruth was more likely to find that kind of rest in Moab than she was in Israel. Ruth had determined to stay with Naomi in spite of the fact that she would not likely find a husband in Israel - where she would be an outsider. But things had happened since Naomi and Ruth had landed back in Bethlehem. Ruth had gained a reputation of being a faithful and hardworking and kind person. From some of the things that Boaz says about her in chapters 2 and 3, it is clear that she had gained the respect of the community and most importantly for the story, she had gained Boaz' respect. And so the fact that she was a Moabite was no longer the obstacle to marriage that it had originally seemed to be.

It is important to understand that the people of God in OT times were largely but not exclusively an ethnic category. That to say that while God's people were largely made up of the biological descendants of Abraham, it was always possible for people from other nations to convert and become true Israelites. Right from the time of the Exodus, there were people counted as Israelites who were not descended from Abraham. Exodus 12:38 says of the people who left Egypt, "A mixed multitude also went up with them...." What this shows us is that right from the beginning it was possible for people who were not biologically connected to Abraham to convert to Israel's God and thus become part of the people of God. We see this happening with Rahab as well during the time of Joshua and the conquest.

So, what was happening to Ruth as time goes on is that she is gaining respect because she has embraced Israel's God and was demonstrating that strikingly in her life. This is seen especially in Boaz' recognition of her as a worthy woman due to how she was serving her mother-in-law and how she had taken refuge under the wings of the God of Israel.

Naomi is watching this happen. And it dawns on her that there is a real possibility for Ruth to find a husband in Boaz. And she cooks up a way of possibly making that happen. She becomes a matchmaker.

There seems to be strong desire in many people, male and female, to facilitate relationships that might otherwise not happen. We call it match-making. Sometimes it is welcomed by the parties who are being

matched. Other times not so much. And occasionally it results in a relationship, marriage, and children. Our church knows of at least one instance of that. The text here in Ruth 3 does not give us any guidance whether matching making is a good thing or not. I guess it depends on the circumstances.

It's interesting to see how Naomi is changing over time. She seems to be emerging from a state of hopelessness and depression. She is very negative in chapter 1. She is very bitter. In chapter 2, when Ruth asks Naomi if she may go to find a field to reap in, Naomi simply says, "Go, my daughter." Ruth takes the initiative. Naomi does not help. She is quite passive at this point. At the end of chapter 2, after learning of Boaz and how he had treated Ruth, she begins to see the Lord's kindness in those events. And now in the beginning of chapter 3 she takes the initiative and hatches a plan to bring Ruth and Boaz together. She is becoming more engaged in life.

That is an interesting progression. It indicates both spiritual and psychological healing. In Naomi's case, the lifting of the cloud of hopelessness seems to be related to the improvement of her circumstances, but it is interesting to see her moving from passive negativity to hope and taking initiative. It is a movement from despair to hope and the book of Ruth as a whole and the Bible as a whole has a message that is intended to move us in the same direction. God is in control. He is committed to blessing his people. He is always moving his people along towards the greatest blessedness of being with him in glory and so the trajectory for his people is always away from despair towards greater hope. This biblical principle is expressed in Psalm 30:5, which says, "Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning." For people of God there may be dark times, but there is always hope for the future because of God's plan of salvation. And in the book of Ruth we see Naomi moving and being moved from despair to hope – from the passiveness of depression to engaging in life and daring to hope again.

Next we look at Naomi's plan. The way in which Naomi seeks to bring Ruth and Boaz together is questionable. Let me read again verses 4-6. Naomi says to Ruth, "Wash therefore and anoint yourself and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But 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."

Now tell me – mothers and fathers – is this something that you would tell your daughter to do even if you liked the guy? We hear those instructions and we cringe and think – that sound's risky. Nighttime – out in the fields – sneaking up on a guy lying in his bed. Lifting the covers – lying down and waiting to be discovered. A lot of possibilities for things to happen that shouldn't happen yet.

Is it possible that Naomi was kind of hoping that something that shouldn't happen might happen? It's not impossible. Remember that Naomi was not a highly sanctified lady. Remember the times in which this story is set is the time of the judges where everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes. But it is also possible that Naomi trusted Ruth and Boaz enough to be confident that they would not fall into sexual sin in this

sexually charged situation. In any case, we are not given access to Naomi's thoughts. Only her words. And those words make us wonder what Naomi is thinking. Those words describe a very risky plan. But in the end we are impressed with Ruth and Boaz and how they handle the situation.

Ruth agrees to do what her mother-in-law is asking. Except she does not say what Naomi told her to say. She goes to the threshing floor. Boaz laid down next to his pile of grain after he had eaten and drank and was merry. After he had fallen asleep, Ruth uncovers his feet and lays down. The uncovering of Boaz' feet may have been a way to awaken him gradually as his feet got cold. And that is what happens. Boaz awakens at midnight and sees a woman at his feet. He asks who she is. And Ruth answers, "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer." This was a request that he marry her. Ruth was asking Boaz to marry her.

This was more than what Naomi had told her to say. Naomi had instructed Ruth to say nothing and wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Ruth, however, is much more bold. She asks Boaz to marry her and the reason she gives is that Boaz was a redeemer.

We must pay some attention to this idea of being a redeemer to understand what is going on here. This is an important theme in this story. According to OT laws, if a person got into financial trouble so that he lost his land, a family member who was better off was to buy that land back to keep it in the family. And that person was called a redeemer. Leviticus 25:25 says, "If your brother becomes poor and sells part of his property, then his nearest redeemer shall come and redeem what his brother has sold." This is one way that close relatives were to be redeemers for their family members.

But there was another part to this institution. It is called levirate marriage. If a man died without having a son, the man's brother was to marry dead man wife and the first son produced by that marriage would inherit the dead man's land and carry on the dead man's name. Deuteronomy 25:6 says, "And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel." So the first son produced in the marriage of the dead man's wife and brother, would be treated as the dead man's son "that his name may not be blotted out of Israel."

So the purpose of the redeemer institution was to help families that had suffered great loss, to keep the land in the family and to continue the name of a man who died without giving birth to a son. Certainly part of the reason for these laws was economic – to keep the land in the family from one generation to the next. But the other part was the continuation family lines. I was not able to find a clear explanation of why that was so important. But it seems to have something to do with the importance of idea of Israel serving the Lord from one generation to the next. Think of Psalm 145:4 which says, "One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."

Another factor may have been the fact that Israel lived in hope of the fulfillment God's great promises of salvation and it would be important for families to continue from generation to generation to be part of the future that God had instored for his people. In any case it is clear that it was important that family lines continue from one generation to the next through time.

So when Ruth asked Boaz to marry her because he was a possible redeemer for Naomi's husband's family, she was referring to these laws. She was asking Boaz to marry her in the hope that they could produce a son who would carry on the line of Elimelech. This would also involve buying the land that Elimelech had left behind when the family moved away to Moab.

Now this was a big ask. For one, Boaz was not a brother-in-law to Ruth. His relationship with Elimelech's family was not so close that he was obligated to marry Ruth to produce an heir for Elimelech. He may have had some obligation with respect to keeping the land in the family. But Ruth was asking a lot of Boaz. He would have to take care of Ruth and Naomi. He would have to buy Elimelech's land. And if he and Ruth produced a son that son would be the inheritor of Elimelech's land.

Now Boaz' response is favorable. That is important because it could have been very different. From a human perspective Naomi's plan was a very long shot. She and Ruth were asking of Boaz far more than he was obligated to give. He could have just shooed Ruth away. But he does not do that. He commends her for what she has done and agrees to redeem her if a closer relative will not do so.

First he commends her for asking him to be her redeemer.

In verse 10 he says, "May you be blessed by the LORD, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich." Here the word *hesed* comes up again. The word "kindness" is a translation for the important Hebrew word *hesed* which has to do with loyalty and going above and beyond in showing kindness. Boaz says that what Ruth has just done in asking him to be her redeemer is greater kindness than her leaving her country and coming to Israel with Naomi. Boaz is much older than Ruth. If she were only looking out for her own interests, she would have gone after younger men. That is what Boaz is saying here.

Boaz interprets Ruth's seeking him as her redeemer an act of sacrificial kindness to her mother-in-law – a greater kindness than leaving Moab to stay with Naomi had been. So while Boaz was kind and well-to-do, he may have not been the most attractive option for Ruth because of his age. And Boaz is suggesting that Ruth was showing great kindness to Naomi by seeking him as her redeemer rather than seeking some younger man and abandoning Elimelech's line. Ruth kindness is seen in the fact that her priority here is not her own comfort, but in following God's will to raise up a son with Boaz who would be able to carry on the line of Elimelech. Leon Morris gives a good summary of the significance of what Boaz says in this verse. "She has not

followed natural inclinations (in seeking a young man in marriage), but has shown a responsible attitude to the family in looking to her redeemer as her marriage partner.” (p. 282)

There is an important application for us here in Boaz’ praise for Ruth’s loyalty. Our situation is very different from that of Ruth. We do not have human redeemers in the same way that ancient Israel had redeemers. But Ruth’s prioritizing the right thing to do over what she might have felt like doing is a powerful example for young people in seeking marriage partners. This does not mean that natural attraction should play no role in choosing a marriage partner. It is clearly important.

But Ruth’s prioritizing God’s will to carry on Elimelech’s line is a reminder for us to prioritize producing children who will be the next generation of the family of God. Along with considering how physically attracted we are to a certain person ought to be the question of whether this person will be a godly father or mother for any children that the Lord may give. Ruth’s example encourages us to think of loyalty to the family of God in choosing whom to date and marry. Young people need to be asking not only am I physically attracted to this person, but also will this person be the kind of parent, should the Lord give children, who will be zealous about raising children in the fear of the Lord. Will the person I marry be the kind of partner who will be a godly parent who will contribute in a godly way to God’s desire that his people train their children to walk in God’s ways.

Now as it happened Boaz was willing to marry Ruth and be the redeemer of Elimelech’s family. But there was a relative who was more closely related who needed to be consulted. If he would redeem Ruth, Boaz would step aside. But if he would not then Boaz was willing to do it. This does not sound much like a love story. And really it’s not. We do not know what feelings that Ruth and Boaz may or may not have had for each other. The story is not interested in romance. That does not mean that romance is wrong, but as far as this story is concerned, what brought Boaz and Ruth together was not romance, but Ruth and Boaz’ desire to do the right thing in producing a son who would continue Elimelech’s line. At the same time Ruth and Naomi would be cared for. By considering the kind of people both Ruth and Boaz were, it is hard to imagine them not coming to love one another. It is hard to imagine an unhappy marriage. But that is not the concern of the story.

It’s a story about how God directed the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz to provide for Naomi and Ruth and to include Ruth in the ancestry of king David and Jesus. It’s also a story of Ruth and Boaz’ loyalty and kindness. Ruth and Boaz are both held up as worthy people – people who demonstrated *hesed* – or steadfast love. They are both people who went above and beyond what most people would have done in their situation. Orpah did what most people would have done. Ruth showed *hesed*. The redeemer who was closer to Naomi was not willing to be a redeemer. Boaz was not strictly obligated to do so but he showed *hesed*. Both Ruth and Boaz are remarkable for the lengths they were willing to go to show loyalty and love – to show steadfast love and kindness.

And certainly they are both being held up for us as examples. God's will for his people is that they reflect his *hesed* in their lives. We are saved by God's steadfast love in Christ. But we are also saved unto steadfast love. And that love is about doing more than the bare minimum. That love is about going above and beyond the call of duty. That is what we see in both Ruth and Boaz. They both go beyond the minimum that they can get away with. They both put service to God and neighbor before their own comfort and ease. And we should ask ourselves whether there is anything of that in us. In our service to God and other people do we do the bare minimum or do we go above and beyond motivated by love for God and other people.

In 2 Corinthians 5:15 Paul wrote that Jesus "died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." Ruth and Boaz were OT saints. They lived before the coming of Christ. But somehow God enabled them to live in such away that they could be examples for we who live after the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. If they could live with such faithfulness, kindness, and love, how much more should we be like them in giving ourselves heartily and sacrificially to God and to people in steadfast love.

There is a strong emphasis on caring for family in the redeemer laws of the OT that are so much a part of this story. The redeemer was to take care of the family. Both Ruth and Boaz are powerful examples of taking care of family. And that emphasis continues into the NT. In 1 Timothy 5:8, Paul writes, "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." Clearly God is very concerned that we provide for our family members. For various reasons the needs are not often economic in our experience – although they may be. But even if they are not we have strong obligations to be there for family members who are in need.

And so we should think of how we care for family members in the light of the example of Ruth and Boaz. The Bible puts significant emphasis on this in both the Old and New Testaments. In many cases for us it will have to do with caring for aging parents. They may not need money, but they will need visits. And that goes for grandparents as well. Ruth and Boaz' steadfast love in caring for Naomi, should cause young people to ask, whether they are showing steadfast love for their grandparents by visiting them and by being there for them as necessary. Ruth and Boaz are two powerful examples of steadfast love that was directed to caring for a family member in need.

But through all this God was showing his steadfast love to Naomi. Ruth and Boaz were sinners, but the story does not focus on their sin. It focuses on their steadfast love. And we know that that steadfast love came from God. This is clear from the fact that one huge point of the story is how God showed steadfast love to Naomi through Ruth and Boaz. They are examples of what kind of life is possible by the grace of God.

But Naomi is an example of weakness. Her roll in the story is to powerfully show the steadfast love of God to people who are weak and sinful. The contrast between Ruth and Boaz on one hand, and Naomi on the other hand reminds us that there is great variation among the people of God. All are sinners saved by grace. But

some are relatively strong and mature – advanced enough to be examples for others – while others are weak and far less advanced in spiritual growth. The story of Naomi is a demonstration of the lengths that God goes to bless and nurture those who are weak.

This characteristic of God is powerfully revealed in Jesus. Think of the way that he spent time with tax collectors and sinners. Remember how he said that he came not to call the righteous but sinners. Remember how Jesus was so gentle with the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Remember how Isaiah foretold that when the servant of the Lord came he would not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick.

The way that God's cared for and nurtured Naomi in this story shows us his steadfast love and that steadfast love is demonstrated in all its glory in Jesus Christ. What was not clear until Jesus suffered and died was how much it would cost for God to show his steadfast love to sinners. But what Jesus demonstrated very clearly while he was on earth was the same gentleness that God shows to Naomi in the book of Ruth. Jesus calls the weary and heavy laden to come to him for rest. He tells us that he is gentle and lowly in heart.

Naomi is an example of a weak believer. The way that God guided her life and ministered to her through Ruth and Boaz shows us how he loves and cares for the weak among his people. May that encourage us when we feel more like Naomi than we feel like Ruth and Boaz. And may it encourage us to strive to be more like Ruth and Boaz as they were reflecting the steadfast love of God in their lives.