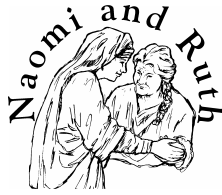


HITCHING WAGONS, HEDGING BETS



Scripture:

Ruth 3

1. Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.'
2. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor.
3. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.
4. 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.'
5. She said to her, 'All that you tell me I will do.'

Ruth 4

13. So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son.
14. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel!
15. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.'
16. Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.
17. The women of the neighborhood 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.

Mark 12

38. As he taught, he said, 'Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places,
39. and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets!
40. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.'
41. He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.
42. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.
43. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.
44. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'



HITCHING WAGONS, HEDGING BETS

If the book of Ruth were made into a movie, it would play well at the Rialto but probably not at the Roxy. I say this because, unlike many of the stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, this one is not action-packed or violent, and the romance and sexual content is discreet. Though it has calamity, heartache and a happy ending worthy of Hollywood, most of the storyline is low-key,

sort of understated. In case you're not familiar with it, let me give a brief summary:

Elimelech, Naomi's husband, is a resident of Bethlehem who takes his family to nearby Moab to escape the famine in Judah. Elimelech soon dies, leaving Naomi with two sons who eventually marry Moabite women. After ten years, both of the sons die too, leaving no offspring. Naomi is bereft. In those

times and places, an older woman would have very little choice but to return to whatever family might remain in Judah.

NAOMI GOES HOME

And so, since God had restored the harvests after the famine, Naomi heads home. Her daughters-in-law intend to go with her, but Naomi urges them to return to their own families of origin, stating the obvious – that she was too old to produce more sons for them to marry, and they wouldn't want to wait for them to grow up anyway! (This is not quite so much of a “Duh!” as you might think, because there were pressures on women to continue blood lines of the families they married into, and often widows were married to older or younger relatives of their husbands' families.)

The daughters-in-law evidently love Naomi very much, as the thought of separation causes them all to cry bitterly. Yet Orpah takes her advice and returns to her family. Ruth, on the other hand, clings to Naomi with the words often quoted at weddings:

**“DO NOT PRESS ME TO LEAVE YOU ...
WHERE YOU GO I WILL GO;
WHERE YOU LODGE, I WILL LODGE;
YOUR PEOPLE SHALL BE MY PEOPLE,
AND YOUR GOD MY GOD.
WHERE YOU DIE I WILL DIE –
THERE WILL I BE BURIED.”**

So eloquent, so devoted. We may wonder what motivates such unusual determination, but the text is silent on Ruth's inner thoughts.

GLEANNING

The text does tell us how others viewed this action. Back in Judah, as the barley harvest begins, Ruth takes the initiative and goes to the field of a relative to glean. (For those of you who don't know this term, gleaning is following those who reap the grain and retrieving what has fallen. Ancient Hebrew law protected very poor folk, like the widows Ruth and Naomi, by allowing them to glean.) When Boaz, the wealthy field owner, sees Ruth among his reapers, he pays special attention to her. He tells her to stay in his fields, ordering the male workers not to bother her, and giving her permission to drink from his wells. She is surprised at such kindness to a foreigner, yet Boaz explains, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before.” He speaks a blessing over Ruth, asking God to reward her for her deeds.

Hebrew law encouraged such generosity, but Boaz outdoes himself, telling his workers to leave larger

amounts behind for Ruth, and she's able to take a huge amount of food home to Naomi. Emboldened, they devise a plan that allows Ruth to skirt convention and offer herself, without scandal, to Boaz as a prospect for marriage. You heard this part in the first reading -- huge stuff for a young widowed foreign girl! Obedient, modest, unassuming, Ruth goes to Boaz, who has partied heavily and is startled in mid-slumber to find a woman at his feet! Because he is upstanding, he sends her away before dawn to protect her reputation, and then goes through a lengthy process of allowing the next-of-kin first dibs on both Elimelech's property and Ruth. The man forfeits his claim, and to everyone's delight, Boaz is granted to what was called “the right of redemption.” And the rest, as they say, is history.

THE REST OF THE STORY

I know this is a long story, and you have already heard the ending. But in among the twists and turns are so many rich lessons, that I didn't want you to miss the chance to see how God opened ways for Naomi and Ruth, because it really looked like pretty much all was lost for them. Nevertheless, Ruth would not leave her beloved mother-in-law, even if her prospects in Moab may well have been brighter. I like to think that living ten years with a Hebrew family convinced Ruth that they had a better way to offer. I like to think that the love she found with Naomi, Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion allowed her to know the love of their God, and that that was partly why she clung to Naomi.

Even if it doesn't say so in the story, I like to think these things. Of course I admire Ruth and Boaz, and even Naomi though she is pretty much of a grump, but she had lost *so* much. Reading commentaries, I am told that these characters represent types, so I hold the idea of them as real people loosely. If she is a type, I would call Ruth not just a courageous, loyal, obedient, optimistic type, but also a trusting and faithful type. And I would call Naomi a faithful type, even though she is very angry with God. I would call Boaz not only a trusting, faithful type, but I would call Boaz a radical redeemer. He defied convention by honoring and marrying a foreigner, allowing God to use him to turn around a seemingly hopeless situation in a huge and magnificent way. Who would ever have thought?

GOD WORKS THROUGH FAITHFUL PEOPLE

Today I want to lift up the fact that this is exactly how God works, through faithful people, and even through those who can barely trust at all any more because of the pain and loss they have suffered. I don't need to tell you Naomi suffered. But she trudged home anyway, with hope at her side, when she couldn't hope herself anymore.

And now I want to fast-forward several hundred years, to a story that would not make any kind of a good movie. We see Jesus and his disciples, in the last scene of Jesus' public ministry, as he is teaching in the temple. Through his eyes, we see the religious leaders looking kind of like strutting peacocks – enjoying their long robes, their respect in the marketplace, their seats of honor in the synagogues and at banquets; in their greed, they take over the property of widows; and they put on shows of piety with their long prayers. As a clergyman, it makes me just a little uncomfortable....

THE WIDOW'S MITE

Then, as Jesus and his disciples move over to the treasury and watch the deposits, he sees large sums donated by many rich people. Suddenly a poor widow comes – I guess she was recognizable in her extreme poverty by filth or tattered rags. In any case, this woman puts in two small coins, equaling perhaps a penny -- the smallest coins known in that culture. Jesus speaks those challenging words, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those....For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." Few, if any of us will have had the experience of owning so little as this widow; Jesus knew it was all she had. She gave all she had. I cannot imagine either having so little or giving it all. Can you?

When I try to imagine such a thing, this is what I feel: I feel that she was devoted to God with a sense of complete trust, growing out of the knowledge that she was utterly dependent on God. At one time, presumably before her husband died, she may have known the luxury of depending on some amount of riches. Would that have distracted her from total dependence on God? I don't see how it couldn't. It is my experience that having property and money is seductive. It is the same with education. Even as these bring with them a sense of security in our culture, they lure us from depending on God. They bring with them a sense that we are really masters and mistresses of our destinies, at least to some extent. There are circumstances that bring us back to the memory that we are mere creatures and not little gods, but usually these circumstances are extreme.

WIDOWS IN OUR CULTURE

In our culture, a widow is not necessarily without resources, as were Ruth, Naomi and this widow in the temple. I think in particular this weekend of the many very young widows of veterans who have fallen in the last few years, and their aging counterparts throughout our nation's recent history. Widows are often recipients of benefits that are legislated in our country. And yet, if a widow falls prey to addiction, illness, or some other catastrophe, she too can find herself homeless and

destitute, which may bring her to a hard-won dependence on God alone. The good news is that God is *so* good, that she can depend on God. Societies which honor God will be responsive to the plight of widows and orphans, and God will use those who are open, like Boaz, to minister to these ones of low situation.

It is more as pastor than as prophet that I stand before you today; for that reason, I highlight another dimension of the story of the widow in the temple and her so-called "mite," which by the way refers not to a tiny organism but a coin, two of which equal a farthing. The widow is herself a type of Jesus, as her act of extravagant giving foreshadows the gift Jesus is soon to make of his life on the cross. She seems to give with abandon, though she may well struggle with her decision the way Jesus did. I know in her shoes, I would probably have saved for myself at least one of the two small coins, if not both.

Which brings me to my conclusions from these two stories. As I consider these women, I try to imagine their spiritual states and compare my own. As one who came of age during the women's movement, part of me recoils at the obvious truth that Ruth and Naomi were always going to be dependent on marriage to a man of means in order to survive well in the ancient Middle East. Yet I can set this modern perspective aside long enough to see God at work in those very different social conditions. The society in Judah cared for its poor in its own way, as does ours. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz took the hands that God dealt them and stepped out in trust, stepped outside of conventional patterns. Ruth hitched her wagon to Naomi's God and to Naomi's people. As she courageously sought her own and Naomi's way, she risked shame and potential humiliation, humbling herself and taking the form of a servant, as would the one whose ancestor she became.

**AND WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO BE
THE WIDOW IN THE TEMPLE?
JESUS KNEW HER HEART AND HONORED HER
ABOVE ALL THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS.
SHE HITCHED HER WAGON WITH ALL SHE HAD
TO THE GOD OF ISRAEL,
HOLDING BACK NOTHING.**

Part of me always asks, "Wouldn't it really be more prudent to keep one of those coins?" Some of you know what I mean, don't you? I have to wrestle with that voice, because my inclination is somehow to try to hedge my bets.

SHANE CLAIBOURNE

I was privileged this past weekend to have attended the annual Youth Specialties National Youthworkers' Convention in Anaheim. We had some amazing,

inspiring speakers and worship leaders, and one of them was a very young man in pretty raggedy clothes and dreadlocks under a bandanna. His name was Shane Claibourne, and he had been Tony Campolo's student at Eastern Baptist Seminary. (If you haven't heard of Tony Campolo, he has long been a major evangelical voice for social justice, and like Jim Wallis of Sojourners fame, he is one of a newly christened bunch of Red Letter Christians who identify themselves with the words of Jesus above all.)

Anyway, at one of his workshops Tony exhorted us to listen to Shane, so I did. He talked about his gradual awakening to the radical call of Jesus to preach good news to the poor. He talked about wanting to go to Calcutta to work with Mother Teresa, and of after much fruitless pursuit, getting an inside phone number from her Sisters in the Northeast. He phoned Calcutta and got a gruff, raspy voice on the line. It was she, herself. Shane said he and some friends wanted to come over, and she said come on over. "But," he stammered, "Where will we stay?" Her reply, as he reported it, began, "Consider the lilies of the field...."

How many of us trust God enough to go that way? Listening to Shane report on his time in Calcutta, and his later times with the poor in Philadelphia, without even thinking, I heard my rationalizing self say, "Oh, it's so much easier to be radical when you're young, without kids to support, etc. etc. etc." You know that voice? It helps to acknowledge those voices we struggle with...self-examination is an important discipline that has fallen out of favor in the church, I fear. Without it, we hide from ourselves and from God exactly those areas God would transform.

TRUSTING GOD

I want to close by encouraging us in the area of trusting God. We who have so many resources are inclined rather to trust in material things. We believe the motto, "In God We Trust" that is emblazoned on our currency. We trust in physical beauty, in education, in cleverness, in athletic ability, in talents, in so-called strength. A personal example from my life: as a child I believed I had to rely on my wits and emotional fortitude to survive challenges in my family, even while I knew that God was my bedrock; so I got good grades, I was a model student and achieved great student-like things; I was as obedient to God and parents as I could imagine being. Then, as I became an adult, things in my life eased up, but I had become so defended, ready to face crisis, that I was only partially open to God's transforming love. Defenses were still erected that were no longer necessary. I'm sure you get the picture. Unlike Ruth, who in her humility was open to the kindness of strangers and trying risky new things, I

continued to rely on my own resources too much. Who knows what blessings I have missed?

BECOMING MORE OPEN TO GOD

We never know how ready God is to breathe new life into us or through us, until we become open to God. We can encourage each other to grow in trust and openness, simply by talking more about the ways God has answered prayers, about the surprising and unexpected ways God has redeemed seemingly hopeless situations. Remember the end of Ruth's story? Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife, and the Lord made her conceive, after ten years of barrenness with Mahlon! Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, and is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." That child was Obed, father of King David, and in Matthew's famous genealogy of Jesus, Ruth the Moabite is one of four women named.

May we all be more like the lilies of the field, secure in the love of our trustworthy Provider. May we be more open to God, the One who restores life. Amen.



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