

What is and What Will Be
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Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

¹Naomi 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. ²Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³Now 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. ⁴When 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." ⁵She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

^{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. ¹⁴Then 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! ¹⁵He 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." ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The 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.

Last week, we began the story of Ruth and Naomi. Naomi, the mother-in-law, and Ruth, the daughter-in-law. Both widows, facing famine in Moab. Naomi can return to Judah and her relatives will have an obligation to help her. Ruth, a Moabite, has no standing and has no promise of welcome in Judah. But Ruth understands Naomi to be her family, and she will not leave her.

Ruth and Naomi continue and go to Bethlehem. They arrive in Bethlehem at the perfect time, the season of harvest. Technically, legally, morally, and Biblically, they are the responsibility of Naomi's husband's family. But either because Elimelech's family have forgotten about him, aren't aware that Naomi is back in town, or they have not chosen to accept the responsibility of feeding two women who have no way to earn their keep, they do not receive help. Naomi and Ruth are on their own. Ruth goes out to gather some food for them. She goes to glean barley after the harvesters have gone through the fields.

It isn't getting the leftovers, per se. Because the harvesters did not harvest everything that they could. It was the practice, it was the custom, it was the Biblical obligation to provide for those who were hungry. Gleaning was one way this happened.

Farmers, land owners, left good produce in the field for those who were old or infirm or without family to care for them to gather, so that they would not be hungry. It was their

belief- none should be hungry, for God provides abundance enough for all. Gleaning wasn't about charity, it was a practice born out of a commitment to justice.

Ruth is out gleaning and she happens upon the field of Boaz, a distant relative of Elimilech and Naomi. Boaz happens to be there and he notices Ruth. Boaz is intrigued and immediately finds out who she is. Ruth gains his favor and starts to benefit. She is brought to eat lunch with Boaz's workers and given all she can eat. Boaz instructs the harvesters to leave extra behind for her to pick up, even to allow her to pick grain from the un-harvested portions of the field. Boaz is Very sweet on Ruth.

When Ruth goes home and tells Naomi what has happened, Naomi wastes no time in helping Ruth find some security. Security is a significant theme in this book. It is what marriage means for these women, not love, but security in having a place to live and food on the table.

Naomi sees Ruth's opportunity. She knows that once the harvest is complete and that there will be a celebration, a big, celebration with abundant food and drink. Naomi tells Ruth to get her best dress on. To get really cleaned up and smelling sweet. To go to the threshing room floor where Boaz will show up, is bound to show up, inebriated and happy. Naomi instructs Ruth to wait for him, and to let nature take its course.

The night unfolds exactly as Naomi predicts. The next morning Boaz wants to figure out how he can marry her. We do not know if Boaz has ever been married. We do not know if he is a widow, but he does not have any children. And despite the ban on marrying Moabites, welcoming Moabites into society, Boaz clearly wants to marry Ruth.

The path to this is not straightforward, so the next morning Boaz forms his plan. First, he makes sure that Ruth can leave the threshing room floor without being seen, for that would have destroyed her reputation. He sends her home with lots of grain, to declare his good intentions, to make clear that his intentions are honorable.

Their marriage is made complicated because it turns out that there is a closer relative to Naomi and Ruth, and due to law, he controls Naomi, and therefore Ruth's future. Why has he not been fulfilling his duty? We do not know.

Boaz decides to play it cool.

He goes to the city gate, where local business and transactions and community decisions are made. And he casually approaches the relative. He tells him that he has become aware of a field that Naomi has to sell- a field that was her husband's. At first, the relative is interested. He has the right of first refusal to purchase it. And when it is a field, he is interested. So then, Boaz slyly slips in that the field isn't just a field. It comes with Ruth

and Naomi. Ruth, who still may marry and whose children would then have rights to the land.¹

The relative is interested in the field if it comes free and clear, he is not interested in it if it comes with obligation.

Upon this realization, and upon realizing that in expressing interest in the land he has acknowledged his obligation to care for Naomi and Ruth, the relative quickly back pedals and asks Boaz to buy the field, and take the responsibility for Naomi and Ruth off of his hands.

Boaz is then able to get what he wants, and he makes it appear like he is doing the relative a favor. It is an example of negotiating well done, for they both believe they have won.

To seal the deal, they take off their sandals and trade them. The deal is complete.

Trading footwear is hardly a tradition we share, but then it was a sign that property had changed hands. Boaz and Ruth marry and are, apparently, quite happy. They have a son, Obed. Naomi is thrilled, there is a grandson that she thought she would never have after her sons died. She and Ruth have a life.

The story goes on to take on greater significance. We are told that Obed became the father of Jesse. And Jesse the father of David. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, that is more than enough to give this story high rank. For us, for all Christians, we know that the story and Obed's line goes on to include Jesus, for he is, we are told, of the house of David.

Now, before we go any further, we should acknowledge that the story of Ruth is good for some things and not so good for others.

Not so good? You'd have to be crazy to think that in 2018 this is how women are going to be treated- traded for sandals, not given a voice, required to seek marriage in order to secure food and lodging, safety.

Some 20 years ago Ben didn't even entertain the idea of asking my father permission to marry me- not only did he know that would have sent me through the roof, it didn't occur to him that my father was the one who would initially need to bless that decision.

¹ Embry, Bradley. "Legalities in the Book of Ruth: A Renewed Look." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 1 (September 2016): 31–44. doi:10.1177/0309089216628519. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1336

But if we can set aside the challenges of the culture of Ruth's time, it is worth noting that this story is named after a woman. The main characters are not Boaz or the relative whose name we don't even learn, it is these two women who teach us about the importance of loyalty and relationship. There are many commentators who see that this text is a triumph for women and an example of a matriarchal culture found within the trappings of patriarchy.

When we embrace that Naomi and Ruth are not here to encourage us to replicate the cultural expectations of their time, this text reveals some important lessons.

Chief among them is that Ruth and Naomi not succeed independently, they succeed together.

They need each other. And not just each other, they need the community in which they live to succeed. They succeed in part because the principle, which is not bound by culture, that when there is abundant grain, nobody should go hungry.

This principle is far from outdated, it's present today, right here in Greenbrier County in the Waste Not/Want Not project at our own Farmer's Market, where healthy food is available for people to purchase and pay what they can, and people are invited to bring the surplus of their land to share. All of it based on the very verse that provided for Ruth and Naomi.

Leviticus 23:22 When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the LORD your God.

We're less than a week past our national election, and I suspect that you were pleased with some of the outcomes and concerned by some others. As Christians, we believe voting is important. Who are leaders are is important.

But another lesson the book of Ruth reminds us of today is that the heroes God works with are almost never the Kings and Queens, the Senators and Justices.

They are the widow who is determined to find a better way.

They are the farmer who picks their best tomato green beans, and not just the overgrown zucchini they forgot to pick, in order to share with someone who could really use some fresh vegetables for supper.

The heroes are the woman who cares for her mother-in-law with tenderness and devotion, and the community of women who gather to celebrate the arrival of a baby, the son of a woman they had been told to fear, but they gather anyway and celebrate not only with Ruth but Naomi.

The feared alien becomes the ancestor of Jesus.

In the great cinematic masterpiece titled “The Muppet Movie” Gonzo sings a song entitled “I’m Going to Go Back There Someday.”²

*This looks familiar, vaguely familiar, almost unreal, yet, it's too soon to feel yet.
Close to my soul, yet so far away. I'm going to go back there someday.
There's not a word yet for old friends who've just met.
Part heaven, part space, or have I found my place?*

There’s not a word yet, for old friends who’ve just met.

I’d argue that there is such a word, and we find it in the book of Ruth.

The word is family.

Which is so much more (and sometimes so much not about)
the DNA present in our bloodstream.

It’s about devotion and care and love and hope, and seeing the God light in another.

This is the heart of this text. But if I have one quibble with Gonzo’s words, it’s that it isn’t a place we’re going back to, it’s the place we’re going to. Not only does the book of Ruth foretell David and Jesus, it tells us the truth about who we can be.

A wise old rabbi once asked his students, “When can you truly say that it is morning, and no longer night?” One student replied, “When I can tell a goat from a donkey.” “No,” answered the rabbi, “not then.” Another said, “When I can tell a palm tree from a fig.” “No, not then, either,” replied the rabbi. “When, then?” his students implored. And the rabbi replied, “Only when you look into the face of every man and every woman and every child and see your brother and your sister. Only then have you seen the light. All else is still darkness.”

Maybe Ruth is here to remind us that we are still looking for dawn.
And that it is on its way.

² Video of the song, retrieved June 9, 2013 and again in November of 2018

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryEjm3k6uY0>

http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/I%27m_Going_to_Go_Back_There_Someday

"I'm Going to Go Back There Someday" is an original song written for the 1979 film *The Muppet Movie*. The Muppets get stranded in the desert, and as night falls they sit around a campfire



Amen. Amen.