

Ruth's Boldness

Today's passage hardly sounds like a story for a children's Sunday School class.



Michael K. Olmsted

When I was eleven years old, in much different times, I asked the pastor teaching our class, "Can a divorced woman go to heaven?" His face got red, his speech was uneven and the class was entertained. I wish I could have listened to the debate when the scholars of Israel decided to include "Ruth" among the sacred scriptures.

It is actually a beautiful story about the impossible becoming possible, nothing like the powerful image of Moses before God on Mt. Sinai, but stunning as God works through seemingly impossible barriers to bring Boaz, a wealthy man of faith, together with a foreign woman who has no reasonable hope for a good life. And yet, if faith in God cannot push barriers aside, transform a life and reveal the true meaning of love, what hope is left for any of us?

So the tale begins. Naomi and Ruth have survived the trip from Moab to Judah, they have exhausted all their resources and they have only one slim, risky hope. Naomi understands the serious possibility of levirate marriage, so she carefully structures a plan that depends on many unpredictables. She knows Boaz is a man of faith and integrity, that he has already seen in Ruth admirable qualities as he tells her: "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" (2:11-12).

So the plan is hatched. Boaz has evidenced unusual concern for Ruth, offering her generous rights in his field. There are two basic circumstances in society – two classes – those who are privileged and those who struggle to survive. Of course there are exceptional

cases, some people of privilege offering hope to those who struggle and some who struggle to overcome the odds. There is one other element at play here: Boaz is a man of both faith and privilege, who seeks God's leading.

Naomi has faith and a plan. Ruth has left everything she knows behind, but she trusts her mother-in-law and she has now seen a significant difference in the lives of these people. "All that you tell me I will do," she says to Naomi (3:5).

Ruth goes to Boaz's threshing floor and does exactly as Naomi has instructed. Harvest time was intense as the grain was secured from bad weather and possible theft, so it is not unusual that Boaz works late and sleeps on the threshing floor. Ruth patiently waits until Boaz falls asleep, then, in the middle of the night she lies down at his feet. When Boaz stirs he discovers this beautiful young woman resting at his feet. He asks who she is (it must still have been dark) and she answers in verse 9: "I am Ruth, your servant: spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin" (go'el). Ruth is asking Boaz to accept her and fulfill the idea of kinsman-redeemer to maintain the family lineage. Boaz commends Ruth for her loyalty and her refusal to enter a marriage of convenience. Then come the words Naomi and Ruth longed for: "Now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman" (v. 11).

Did you notice that Boaz seems prepared for this situation? He quickly follows the promise to pursue a legal marriage, with a caution that "Though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I" (v. 12). But Boaz is firm in his promise to pursue this matter "in the morning," going on to tell Ruth to rest until daybreak (v 13).

It seems that Boaz, who is both honorable and understanding, is truly attracted to Ruth. Is this more than a beautiful love story? Remember, I said at the beginning of this study that "Ruth" appears in the midst of dramatic and troubling times, framed by tragedy and colorful prophets. Beyond the sovereignty of God we are witnessing

Formations

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Scripture: Ruth 3:1-13

the lavish generosity of God's love. Israel's Jehovah is nothing like the unpredictable and capricious gods of the pagan world. Boaz has come to love Ruth, but that has only been possible because the tragedies of life have brought Ruth to a place of discovery among a people who serve God.

When we speak of our faith in God, do we limit what God will do in the parameters of our religious culture? Will God work in ways outside our culture, politics, racial identity and traditions, such as in the life of a woman from Moab? Naomi put together a bold plan that could have ended very badly, but it seems God was working in the circumstances as well as in the hearts of all who were involved.

All the details are not divulged. Do you wish you could hear all the conversations between Naomi and Ruth? Or, read the mind of Boaz? Have you ever wished for complete information about a difficult situation you face? Wouldn't it be easier if God would give you all the facts and a detailed plan of action to pursue? Have you ever been surprised by God's blessing when it seemed nothing was working out? Life involves faith – that is, trusting God and doing the best you can.

We have witnessed a respected wealthy man of faith confronted by a bold marriage proposal concocted and carried out by two resourceful women. Is Boaz a naive participant or is he a man who quietly observes what is happening and reacts out of his heart's longing? Failure and conflict were always a possibility. The other man could have asserted his rights as a closer relative to Naomi's dead husband. Gossip could have ruined the possibilities. There was risk, but there usually is risk in key decisions. We all face challenges, heartaches, failure, and uncertainty, but only when we move forward or take a chance do we discover and grow. This beautiful love story reminds us that life involves risks, but with the strength of God's love and grace there is much to be discovered. Faith is the foundation for the right kind of boldness.