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Ruth 4:1-12

Fifth Message

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REDEEMING LOVE

SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS

With its wide variety of nationalities, our church is a wonderful taste of what heaven will be like. Believers from every country and tongue will worship the Lord. How wonderful! The more I learn about your culture, the better I am able to appreciate your heritage and your customs. This is true for the book of Ruth as well. It has certain Hebrew customs that are crucial to understand in order to fully grasp the message of the book.

Primarily we must understand that the relationship of Israelites to each other is grounded on their covenant relationship with the Lord. Just as the Lord in his love and mercy redeemed Israel by delivering them out of bondage in Egypt, bringing them into the Promised Land where they could find freedom and hope, so too the people of God as a community are to care for one another out of covenant loyalty.

A key feature in caring for one another is the role of the kinsman-redeemer. According to Israelite law and custom, a “kinsman-redeemer” was the nearest male relative upon whom fell certain duties to care for his next of kin who were in great difficulty or danger. He was expected to bring justice, protection, and redemption to his close relatives in desperate need.

This is particularly true with respect to two central elements in the Abrahamic covenant: the continuation of the family line, and the ongoing enjoyment of each clan with their allotted portion of the Promised Land. The Torah said that the family land should remain within the family in perpetuity as a symbol of God’s ongoing covenant blessing. This is why the continuation of the family name was so crucial, and why the custom of levirate marriage was so important to barren widows.

When a husband died without children, it was the responsibility of his *‘levir’* (brother or near male relative) to marry the man’s widow and father a son who would become an heir for the dead man. In this way the family line would not die out and the family land would be preserved.

In our last study we were left with a cliff-hanger. With hope for a levirate marriage, Ruth courageously approached Boaz and asked him to act as her kinsman-redeemer. Boaz responded eagerly that he was willing to marry her, but there was a problem. There was another kinsman who was an even closer relation to Naomi than Boaz, and this man must be given the first opportunity to act as her redeemer.

The suspense builds as we wait to see whether Ruth will end up with Boaz or this unknown relative. Will this other rela-

tive claim the right of kinsman-redeemer towards Ruth or will Boaz redeem her?

I. Boaz convenes a legal assembly (4:1-2)

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down. Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. (4:1-2 NIV)

At first light, after his encounter with Ruth at the threshing floor, Boaz went straight to the city gate. In the ancient east, the main gate of the town was a short passageway through the thick city wall that provided the town an entrance and exit. Sooner or later everyone from the city would pass through the gate. Because of the large flow of people in and out, it became the social center where citizens would gather to buy and sell their goods, as well as settle legal matters.

Determined to settle the matter quickly, Boaz waits at the town gate, knowing that eventually the nearer kinsman-redeemer would pass through. When he does, Boaz invites him to sit down. Then he assembles a council of elders to serve as reliable witnesses to this very serious and important proceeding.

The way the narrator introduces us to this nearer-kinsman is revealing. The salutation by Boaz, translated as “my friend,” misses the intent of the narrator. The initial Hebrew listeners of this story would not have heard the words “my friend,” but instead the Hebrew idiom *peloni almoni*. This is a rhyming parody used for the sole purpose of keeping this man anonymous. It would be our rough equivalent of referring to him as Mr. So-and-so.

I’m sure Boaz knew his name, and called him by it, but the narrator throughout this entire episode deliberately does not include it. He does not want this man’s name to be recorded in history. We will soon find out why he views him with such disdain.

Once Boaz has Mr. So-and-so seated in the midst of a legal assembly he quickly addresses the issue that is on his heart. The dialogue between Boaz and this nearer kinsman unfolds in two stages. As the dialogue progresses, the true character of each is revealed.

II. First exchange between Boaz and nearer kinsman (4:3-4)

Then he said to the kinsman-redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelek. I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.” “I will redeem it,” he said. (4:3-4)

In this first exchange, Boaz revealed to Mr. So-and-so that his near relative Naomi, who has recently returned from Moab, must sell the land that belonged to her husband Elimelek. Without a husband or sons to work or inherit the land, Naomi is forced to sell the property. According to the Torah, when family property goes up for sale, the nearest kinsman has the responsibility to redeem the land and keep it within the clan. Boaz suggests to him that as the nearest kinsman he should buy the land, and quickly adds that if he will not then Boaz will redeem it.

Without hesitation this nearer kinsman replies that he will redeem it. Redeeming land from a widow with no male descendants would be quite profitable. The amount he paid to redeem the land would not only be offset by the ongoing production of the field, but he would also be able to add the land to his overall estate and increase his fortune. Mr. So-and-so agrees to buy so quickly, and without further investigation of any details, we wonder if his intent is to aid Naomi or if he is trying to take advantage of her plight. At this point we are not sure. Redeeming only the land is not the full extent of his duty as nearest male relative.

III. Second exchange between Boaz and nearer kinsman (4:5-8)

Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.” (4:5)

In this second exchange, Boaz makes it clear that a double duty falls upon him as kinsman redeemer in this situation. Boaz underscores that it is not just Naomi’s land that is under the threat of loss, but also the family name of Elimelek. Naomi may be past child-bearing years, but their daughter-in-law Ruth is not.

Boaz insists that Ruth, as a childless widow within the family, is entitled to a levirate marriage. He tells this near kinsman that if he takes on the privilege of acting as kinsman-redeemer, then he has the responsibility to marry Ruth and father a son who will inherit Elimelek’s name and property.

This new information radically changes the value of the investment and creates a dilemma for Mr. So-and-so. If he could

buy Naomi’s land without the responsibility of fathering a son for Ruth, then the land would become part of his estate and would pass to his own sons. However, if he marries Ruth, and fathers a son with her, then that son would legally carry on Elimelek’s name and inherit the property.

In that case, the kinsman will have paid for the land and paid to support Ruth and her son, but none of that expense would result in enlarging his own estate. Buying the land and marrying Ruth is an expensive and sacrificial undertaking. If he buys the field, he ultimately does so only to tend it until Ruth raises a son to reclaim it.

Such a marriage and sacrifice was not strictly commanded. It would be a voluntary act of loyal-love. Boaz is prepared to do this. But what about this nearer-kinsman?

At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.” (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it yourself.” And he removed his sandal. (4:6-8)

Mr. So-and-so was initially willing to fulfill his duty as a kinsman redeemer as long as it was only the land being considered. Once redeeming Ruth entered the picture, the financial gain that he might have expected evaporated before his eyes. What a moment before seemed like a lucrative real estate deal quickly became a “no win” investment that would diminish his “bottom line.” Mr. So-and-so backs out and says he cannot redeem.

His justification for not fulfilling his duty as kinsman-redeemer was because to do so might endanger his own estate, and it definitely would. His wealth and inheritance would be greatly diminished. To voluntarily assume the role of kinsman-redeemer would be a generous act of love and loyalty, and involve personal sacrifice. It was a price he was unwilling to pay.

He was unwilling to save the name of Elimelek and Mahlon as well as protect their defenseless widows. He was willing to enjoy the blessings as a member of God’s covenant community, but when it came time to sacrifice for the well-being of those outside his immediate family he was unwilling to do so.

A few months ago, as I was reading “Newsweek” magazine, a headline caught my eye: “Why I’m Giving Away \$1 Billion: The moment is overdue for us to become moral and worthy ancestors.” In the article, Peter Peterson, recently retired from the Blackstone Group, explains why he decided to commit one billion dollars to charity. At the end of the article he shares why he is giving away so much by telling a story: “Kurt Vonnegut once told a story about seeing Joseph Heller at a wealthy hedge-fund manager’s party at a beach house in the Hamptons. Casting his eye around the luxurious setting, Vonnegut said, “Joe, doesn’t it bother you that this guy makes more in

a day than you ever made from Catch-22?” “No, not really,” Heller said. “I have something that he doesn’t have: I know the meaning of enough.”¹

Whether we are billionaires or struggling to make ends meet, how much is enough is a question we all must wrestle with. There is nothing wrong with buying a new car, taking a vacation to Hawaii, or remodeling our house, but are we also caring for the needs of those around us?

Mr. So-and-so thought only in terms of his own personal profit and loss. He did not have the eyes of faith to see that generous and sacrificial loyal-love was never intended to register on any kind of balance sheet. He did not look at life in a redemptive way and refused to fulfill his covenant obligations. He literally walked away from the opportunity to demonstrate loyal-love.

This is why his name is not given in this story. The irony in all this is that this man, so concerned with leaving a lasting legacy, remains nameless for all of history. He reminds me of the rich young ruler, with much wealth to preserve, who refused to sell his possessions and follow Christ. He clung to what he had and lost something far greater. How sad.

After Mr. So-and-so refused to fulfill the role of kinsman-redeemer he took off his sandal and gave it to Boaz as a visible and formal sign that he was handing over his right of redemption to Boaz. To confirm that this transaction was legal and binding, Boaz addressed the elders present.

IV. Boaz redeems Elimelek’s property and Ruth (4:9-10)

Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!” (4:9-10)

What Mr. So-and-so was unwilling to do, Boaz does eagerly. He calls upon the elders and all the people present to be official witnesses that he has taken on the responsibilities of kinsman-redeemer toward Ruth and Naomi to the fullest extent. He will not only redeem the land, he will also marry Ruth.

There is nothing calculating or self-serving about Boaz’s generosity. He was not redeeming the land or marrying Ruth for what he could gain. His act of loyal-love was driven by his desire to meet the needs of Ruth and Naomi and preserve for them the name and inheritance of their dead husbands.

The refusal of Mr. So-and-so to assume the role of kinsman-redeemer only highlights the kindness of Boaz toward the two widows. Boaz knew the cost, yet embraced the opportunity

to serve and bless those who could never repay him. He was under no obligation, yet he willingly paid the price that others might have a lasting legacy. Boaz was given the opportunity to put his actions behind his words, and he seized it.

Mike Singletary, head coach of 49ers, likes to use pithy phrases to get his message across. Using a line from one of his first locker-room speeches, there were t-shirts printed at training camp meant to motivate his players. The shirts read: “Don’t tell me. Show me.”

Talk comes cheap, but action speaks louder than words. Boaz’s selfless act of loyal-love was loud indeed. The elders and all those gathered at the gate agree.

V. Prayer of blessing (4:11-12)

Then the elders and all those at the gate said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.” (4:11-12)

The elders and bystanders at the gate not only officially declare their witness of the legal proceedings, they also give their hearty approval of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth by offering a blessing upon their union.

Boaz’s actions were praised so highly because they benefited not only this one family but the whole community. By caring for the least able to care for themselves, Boaz built up the nation of Israel and exemplified the loyal-love of the Lord for his people.

Inspired by such amazing love, they first pronounce a blessing of fertility on Ruth: “Like Rachel and Leah, who built up the house of Israel, may the Lord give her many children.” Secondly, they pray that through this levirate marriage would grow a family that would be respected and celebrated like that of Perez, born also of a levirate-like union between Tamar and Judah. Next week, we’ll see that their prayers are fulfilled in ways they couldn’t even imagine.

I learn so much from Boaz. He lived his life according to what I like to call the “new math.” It is a way of life expressed by Jesus, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:31-33).

Making our own kingdom priority #1 is the “old math.” This is living life believing that a good investment is only one that benefits ourselves. Making God’s kingdom our first priority is the “new math.” This is living life investing ourselves

in others with the expectation not of personal benefit, but of glorifying God and expanding his kingdom.

This is not easy for me. I am far too often selfish and small. How easily I adopt the wisdom of the world and live as though my time, money, and resources once spent are gone forever. I fail to appreciate that even the smallest investment in the lives of others can bring eternal blessings.

Do you struggle with this as well? In our dedication to preserve and protect what we have for ourselves and our families, I wonder how often we miss out on the joy of participating in God's good work.

Boaz was an 'A' student in the "new math." He did not view his sacrificial giving as a "subtraction" from his life, but an "addition." He did not believe his life became increasingly empty as he spent it in service of others for God's glory, but more full—full of love and relationships.

The book of Ruth is a great encouragement to remember that no matter our current situation, God is always part of the equation. He is at work redeeming the world to himself and we are invited to participate. A.G. Auld says it well, "Christians may not readily think of themselves as sharing in the responsibility of redemption. Yet solidarity with brother and neighbor is precisely our calling—with brothers who are not of our own family, and with neighbors who are far from our own doors."²

Who in your neighborhood and in your community has God called you to love? Is it the widow down the street or the elderly man who lives alone around the corner? Is it the single mother struggling with her kids or the unemployed father trying to provide for his family? Is it the teenager rebelling against his parents or the missionary couple overseas? Maybe it's a soldier in Afghanistan or someone who has expressed a need in our bulletin.

How can you use the resources God has blessed you with to care for them? Our generous love for others mirrors the redeeming love of God. It is not the kind of love the world gives. United with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, our selfless-love is a tremendous bond among believers and a powerful witness to the world.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Phil. 2:1-4).

Boaz put the interests of Ruth and Naomi above his own. He loved Ruth, a foreigner in desperate poverty, and sacrificed for her that she would have a new life. As I reflect on how Boaz out of a heart full of loyal-love sacrificed to redeem his Gentile bride, I cannot help but think of Jesus. I stand in awe and give thanks for how Christ in his extravagant love sacrificed himself to redeem his bride, the Church.

Jesus came to seek and save what was lost (Luke 19:10). He came to rescue and redeem sinners like you and me. Because of his great love for us he took upon himself the role of Kinsman-Redeemer to save us from sin and death. He paid our full debt. Through his death and resurrection we are no longer foreigners or outsiders. We are a new creation. We are children of God and members of his family.

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household (Eph 2:17-19).

What awesome redeeming love Jesus demonstrated for us on the cross! He laid down his life for you and me. Do you know this love of God? Have you responded to his initiative of love by giving yourself to him? Whoever you are, whatever you have done, God invites you to cling to him. There is room for us all at the foot of the cross. He will redeem you and welcome you into his family.

We love because he first loved us. Filled with his extravagant love and strengthened with the Holy Spirit, we can love like he loves. With gratitude and joy may we pursue his kingdom, his righteousness, and his glory. Amen.

Peter G. Peterson, "Why I'm Giving Away \$1 Billion: The moment is overdue for us to become moral and worthy ancestors." (Newsweek, June 8, 2009) 23.

Auld, A. G. *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, The Daily Study Bible Series* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 276.

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