



Treasure – Kristen Chen

**The Cost and Crowning Joy
of *hesed*-love**

Ruth 4:1-22

To introduce our text this morning, I chose a painting by Kristen Chen, a former PBCC’r now living in Durango, Colorado. “This piece is about the **love of God** as shown through the events of the past several weeks: a reunion with a best friend, a wedding, a daughter’s birthday, a friend helping me in a big way when I needed her, and the ongoing conversation woven through the decades about this great love that is a mystery and flows in us, through us, to be poured out, a fountain. This is that embrace.”¹

Similarly, the book of Ruth draws into the very heart of God, his compassion and *hesed* love (“unfailing love for the helpless”) that takes root in two women who are teetering on the edge of survival. When lives are at stake, *hesed* love becomes bold and creative and will take risks that might seem inappropriate in another context, but in so doing brings about a remarkable **transformation** of a community in radical new ways of how we relate, one to another that opens the door to a future that outlives time.

Last week, the **transformation** was highlighted by the phrase—“*my daughter*— occurring five times in the chapter. In the book of Judges the phrase occurs twice. First, “my daughter” is the one “given” in marriage by her father as a trophy for military exploits (Judg 1:2); and second, to our horror, “my daughter” is the one **sacrificed** because of her father’s rash and stupid vow (Judg 11:35)! In the book of Ruth, these despicable connotations are lifted out of muck and mire and **transformed** by Ruth’s acts of *hesed* love. On the lips of Naomi and Boaz the phrase identifies Ruth, the Moabite, as a beloved and true daughter of Israel. The high point comes when Ruth confronts Boaz in the middle of the night with a marriage proposal and a truckload of family responsibilities he never dreamed of. Rather than taking offense or becoming defensive, Boaz listens and responds,

“And now, my daughter, do not fear.

All that you say I will do, for all my fellow townsmen (lit. “the gate of my people”) know that you are a worthy woman.” (3:11)

Boaz calls her an *ʿēsāet ḥayil* (“a noble and competent woman”) raising Ruth’s status to that of his own (*ish gibbor ḥayil*, lit., “a man mighty-in-strength”). Boaz’s words are not empty platitudes. Contrary to his patriarchal bias, he actually believes Ruth is his equal—a noble woman whose courage and commitment is highly praised among the leading citizens of Bethlehem. As a prominent man in Bethlehem, he has no problem embracing her ideas and throwing his full weight behind her initiatives, which are not motivated by self-interest, but for the purpose of saving lives! This is a holy alliance galvanized for the holy and courageous work of redemption.

“Redeemer” occurs twenty times in this and the preceding chapter, identifying the central theme of the book and the “crowning Joy” of *hesed* love. This is what makes *hesed* love so attractive and contagious. It’s the call to join the Lord’s army in the dangerous, yet most rewarding work on the planet. It is the work that makes us most gloriously human, because it is divine.

As we turn the page we find Boaz up at the crack of dawn and making his way to the city gate driven by the weight and privilege of his new agenda for the day. Ruth and Naomi’s fate now rests entirely on his initiative, legal craft and skill as he presents their case to her next of kin. In our spiritual journey there are times when our initiatives must cease and we must let go and place them in God’s hands for the outcome.

I. Negotiations with *peloni almoni* (4:1-8)

A. First dialogue (vv. 1-4)

1 Now Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there. And behold, passing by, is the redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken. And he said, "Turn aside, sit down here, *P'loni Almoni*." And he turned aside and sat down. 2 And he took ten men from the town elders and said, "Sit down here," and they sat down.

The city gate was not only the place of entry to the city, it was the seat of commercial and business transactions, and more importantly, where justice was to be established (Amos 5:10-12, 15). No sooner has Boaz taken his seat, that he looks up and sees Naomi's kinsman passing by. Boaz's authority is evident by his abrupt command and instant obedience of *P'loni Almoni*. That is not his real name, but a rhyming parody, similar to "Joe Schmoe" or "So-an-so." Because he will refuse to restore the name of the dead, the narrator refuses to memorialize his name.

Once he has Mr. No-name in his seat, Boaz takes great care to ensure he has a proper legal forum to witness and notarize the proceedings. The elders respond to Boaz's command with the same unquestioning obedience as Naomi's kinsman. Boaz evidently exercises considerable influence within the community, which he is going to leverage to accomplish good, without being hindered by possible objections over legal technicalities.

**3 Then he said to the redeemer,
"The portion of the field
that belonged to our brother; to Elimelech—
Naomi has put it up for sale...
the one who returned from the field of Moab."**

Once everyone is seated, Boaz introduces the issue at hand, with no formal introduction. He chooses his words very carefully and reveals that Naomi is selling her rights to her inheritance. The promised land ultimately belonged to God but was subdivided and parceled out permanently by tribe and family. The proprietary rights to the land were vested in the clan, with individuals only holding the right of possession and the profits from its use. When family property goes up for sale, the nearest kinsman has the responsibility to redeem it and buy it back for the clan. The mention of Naomi

brings up a slight complication of the cost involved of caring for a widow until she dies, but it is minor compared to the potential gain if he secures Elimelech's property. Before Mr. No Name has a chance to ponder the implications involved, Boaz turns up the heat.

**4 "And as for me, I thought, I shall alert you, saying,
'Acquire, before those sitting here
and before of the elders of my people!
If you would redeem, then redeem.
But if you will not redeem, tell me, so I may know.
For there is no one besides you to redeem, and I am after you.'"
And he said, "I will redeem." (vv. 3-4)**

The phrase "I shall alert you" (lit. "*I will uncover your ear*") is used elsewhere to indicate that the speaker is in a position to disclose information that could not come from another source. That information is announced in the final phrase, "I am after you!"... (as if to say) "I'm standing right behind you with my checkbook in hand to close the deal." Boaz relentlessly presses him to take on this honorable task in the presence of our community by repeating the verb 'redeem' four times (*ga'al, ga'al, ga'al, ga'al*). Ellen Davis notes that "these verbal forms appear without a direct object; there is no mention of what (or who) is to be acquired or redeemed—the land, or even Ruth...the lack of an *object* puts the focus entirely on the *subject*—the person who will (or will not) enact the role of the redeemer."²

This is a dramatic courtroom moment as Boaz acts with shrewd attorney rhetoric, enlisting the crowd and luring Mr. No-name to step into the spotlight and commit to the honorable task of caring for a widow before this esteemed assembly. Mr. No-name steps up to the plate right on cue and accepts the task. Unfortunately he is clueless that Boaz is about to make use of a bait-and-switch ploy that will cast the would-be redeemer in an unfavorable light.

B. Second dialogue (vv. 5-8)

**5 And Boaz said,
"The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, —ahem!—
Ruth the Moabite, wife of the dead, you acquire
in order to raise up the name of the dead in his inheritance."**

This is a bold and unprecedented move by Boaz. Carolyn James gives the background to this law:

In the eyes of the culture and of the men in Elimelech's family, Naomi is "the widow of the deceased." The property under question belonged to Naomi's husband, Elimelech. The levirate law applied to Naomi, Elimelech's widow, but is now no longer relevant since she is past the childbearing age...Boaz and Mr. No-Name could walk away with a clear conscience, for they were not Elimelech's brother, as Naomi would never get pregnant. The spirit of the law, however, said, "**Save the family,**" which binds the hearts of Yahweh's children and moves them to find a way to do the impossible.³

Boaz has discovered a way to "raise up the dead!"—Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite, whose reputation you all know! With fearless determination he declares his commitment "to raise up the name of the dead" by marrying Ruth. Now it doesn't take much of an imagination to hear the roar of applause, suffocating any possibility of a legalistic rebuttal over the details of the law.

And there is poor Mr. No-name, who now has to count the cost after agreeing to redeem. Like Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* we can imagine him deliberating within his mind—"On the one hand, Ruth has been barren for ten years and may never conceive and the land will become mine free and clear and will more than offset the expense of caring for these two widows. On the other hand, is anything too hard for God? If she does conceive, everything I have invested to purchase and cultivate Naomi's land will go to her child! Oy vey, the price tag could ruin me!"

6 Then the redeemer said,

"I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I spoil my inheritance.

Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem."

Having come to grips with the financial responsibility, Mr. No-name emphatically reverses his plea, despite the shame. The decision to relinquish his rights reflects the enormity of the sacrifice Boaz is willing to make and the price *hesed* is willing to pay to redeem others. What we learn from Boaz's example is that goal of *hesed* is not financial security, but giving security to those who have none, which is "go'el"

7 Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging, to confirm any legal matter:

A man removed his sandal and gave it to his fellow. And this was the manner of attesting in Israel.

8 And the redeemer said to Boaz,

“Acquire it for yourself.”

And he removed his sandal.

At this point the narrator makes a rare aside to offer an explanation to a custom that was not understood when the text was written. Ellen Davis suggests, “We can only guess why the symbol of the sandal figures in the transfer of land: perhaps the right ‘to walk off; the boundaries of the plot as one’s own? An Israelite poet imaginatively portrays God thus laying claim to a whole country. ‘On Edom I cast my sandal’ (Ps 60:10).”⁴ In any case, I suspect it functioned like a notary public certifying the authenticity of a document of sale, which makes Boaz’s title as redeemer (*go’el*) irrefutable.

II. Boaz’s Declaration Before the Elders and People (4:9-12)

A. Witnesses invoked (vv.9-10)

9 Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, “You are witnesses this day that I have acquired all that belonged to Elimelech, and all that belonged to Chilion and to Mahlon, from the hand of Naomi. 10 And also Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, I have acquired for my own wife, to raise up the name of the dead over his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers and from the gate of his place. You are witnesses this day.”

As Boaz grasps his kinsman’s sandal, he outlines in complete detail the two obligations the nearer redeemer has ceded to him—the right to his inheritance and to Ruth, the Moabitess, who we now discover was the wife of Mahlon. In the renaming of every family member, except Orpah, he symbolizes the restoration of the clan so that the memory of the deceased may not perish.

It is a new day in Bethlehem. City elders and villagers, who are deeply moved by what they have just witnessed, joyfully surround their native son and give a threefold blessing to the newly engaged couple.

B. Threefold blessing on Boaz (vv. 11-12)

11 Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman, who is coming into your house, like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem, 12

and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah, because of the offspring that the LORD will give you by this young woman."

Though Ruth is not present, she maintains a strong presence in everyone's mind. Foreshadowing Jesus' practice, the community fully embrace a Gentile woman into the family circle, before anyone knows whether or not the Lord will bless the couple with offspring. So confident are they of God's *hesed* love and power, they foresee Ruth taking her place on the podium as a "nation builder" alongside Rachel and Leah.

At the center of the blessing is a prayer that Boaz continue and even increase acts of valor and that the Lord reward the one who maintained the name of the dead with a name (of his own).

The blessing concludes connecting...Ruth to Tamar, the mother of their tribe. Both were foreigners who married Israelite men. Both were widowed (Tamar twice) and exhibit deep familial loyalty by courageously breaking with social protocol to rescue their deceased husbands from extinction. As with Ruth, Tamar's righteous actions had a profound spiritual impact on a man. She pulled her father-in-law, Judah, out of a spiritual ditch and back on the solid path, where he thereafter lived as a true son of Yahweh.⁵

As a result of Tamar's bravery, Judah became the first individual in the Bible to offer his life as a sacrifice for others. Tamar was the mother of Perez, from whom Elimelech, Boaz and Mr. No-Name descended. Villagers pray that, like Tamar, Ruth will produce a family of greatness that measures up to Perez's family....it does more than that, the genealogy at the end reveals her child Obed (who is $\frac{3}{4}$ Gentile) will build the royal house of King David and ultimately the long-awaited Messiah.⁶ Here we begin to see how sacrificial acts of *hesed* love in the present open the floodgate to blessings in the future.

III. Ruth and Boaz's Gift to Naomi (4:13-17)

13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son.

The story reaches its climax with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the gift of their offspring to Naomi. In contrast to her ten years of infertility, she is able to conceive immediately. Ruth's conception is only the second time in the book that the narrator

notes God's direct intervention. "Thus it underscores the fact that the child's birth is a providential event, the blessed result of both extraordinary human initiative and the common but never less-than- miraculous action of God in making the womb fruitful."⁷

14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, 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 given birth to him."

Upon the child's birth, the women in the neighborhood pray a benediction upon Naomi, blessing the Lord who has not left Naomi without "a kinsman-redeemer" who will retain her family's property and name. Then they petition God to make the child "famous in Bethlehem and predict that the child will rejuvenate and sustain Naomi in her old age because his mother will exemplify to him "love," not just duty, and care that "is better than seven sons."

Obed becomes the beneficiary of all that the two women have gained and from what they have suffered and sacrificed. As Naomi's "daughter," Ruth is worthy of the women's highest accolades, "better than seven sons." They really mean it. Naomi is better off with Ruth than a lot of women who gave birth to what the ancient world regarded as the perfect number of sons.

16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. 17 And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

"The books ends in a way that we do not expect. Boaz and our heroine Ruth are gone from sight, a clear indication that this book is about something much great than a fairytale romance."⁸

(In appreciation for Carolyn James' work

I conclude my sermon with her words)⁹

Even after Obed is born, Ruth continues sacrificing for Naomi. She never veered from her vow. Here at the last, in the final and greatest sacrifice of all, Ruth gives up her child. Naomi now takes Ruth's precious gift and lays him in her lap as his legal mother.

Little does she know that the whole world is counting on the baby she cradles in her arms for the fulfillment of God’s promises to redeem his people and put to rights the fallen world. But as one who experienced severe suffering, bitterness and despair—the female Job—she went through the dark night of the soul, spending time at ground zero—getting angry, feeling betrayed, abandoned and forgotten. She learned to ask hard questions, cope with unanswered prayer and endure countless sleepless nights filled with doubt and fear and anxieties. She had to find God’s *hesed* love in the middle of mess. The dark night of the soul is an awful place to be, but that’s where God trains his best warriors. Although Naomi looked and felt as if her life was being dismantled and she was being put out of action, God was actually raising her up and equipping her for a mission-critical assignment in his kingdom.

The birth of Obed is a picture of the gospel—suffering and sacrifice, the joy of renewed life, and hope for the future all mingled together. This is the gospel of Ruth.

IV. The Genealogy of David (4:18-22)

18 Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron,

19 Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab,

20 Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon,

21 Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed,

22 Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

Paul Biggar observes,

“The ten generations in the genealogy balance the ten years in Moab, [and] Ruth, who is worth more than seven sons to Naomi, marries the seventh generation Boaz.”¹⁰

Like Jesus, Ruth is new wine poured into Israel’s old wineskins. Those old wineskins simply burst under the expanding pressure of their relentless pursuit of the deeper meaning of God’s law and her search for more radical ways of loving him. Ruth is a breath of fresh air in a world where good is good enough and God’s people settle for small visions of themselves. Her courageous actions send seismic tremors ripping through ancient Bethlehem in every episode, she’s making sacrifices and shining the bright light of the gospel into the dark arena when the judges ruled and the results are transformational.

Naomi's broken down life is recharged. Boaz awakens to an expanded vista of how much more a man can (and should) do for others with the undeserved advantages and blessings God has given him. He and Ruth forge an alliance that gives us a rare Old Testament glimpse of the Blessed Alliances, as male and female partner in a holy cause, and both thrive as Yahweh's image bearers and accomplish more together than either of them could have done separately. In the end, there is deep respect, mutual submission, and a powerful partnership that rocks the community, and multiplies *hesed* so that the injustices toward at least one widow are stopped. A family is saved. *Hesed* spreads like wildfire from Bethlehem highway to the fields of Boaz and the threshing floor, past the city gates, into the small veins of a newborn baby boy.

So what happens when a woman takes the initiative and a man responds? Does the earth spin off its axis? Do the foundations of human society as God designed them begin to crumble? Does a man grow stronger or weaker when he encounters a strong woman like Ruth? Is his manhood diminished? Judging from Boaz, it can mean the difference between a good man becoming a great man. Boaz enters the story as a man of valor who deserves her admiration and respect. After joining forces with Ruth, he stands even taller, for he exits as the great-grandfather of King David and a forefather of Jesus.

**But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honored, and I love you,
I have given my only begotten son,
in exchange for your life.
Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.”
(Isa 43:1, 3 adapted)**

¹ <https://www.kristenchen.com/shop-art>

² Ellen F. Davis and Margaret Adams Parker, *Who are You My Daughter? Reading Ruth Through Text and Image* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2003), 99.

³ Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth, Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 183-84,

⁴ Davis, *Who are You My Daughter?* 105.

⁵ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 194-95.

⁶ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 195.

⁷ Davis, *Who are You My Daughter?* 113.

⁸ Davis, *Who are You My Daughter?* 117.

⁹ James, *The Gospel of Ruth*, 177, 202-07.

¹⁰ Paul Biggar, "The Contribution of Rhetorical Criticism to the Study of Theology in the Book of Ruth" (M.Th. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989), 47.