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Ruth 3:1-18

Fourth Message

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# RISKY FAITH

*SERIES: FROM EMPTINESS TO FULLNESS*

I'm a big fan of books and movies that are filled with surprises and cliffhangers. I find them so enjoyable and satisfying because they are true to life. My life has had several plot twists that I never expected, and there are several more to come, I'm sure. My guess is that is true for you as well.

When we come across such times of uncertainty and difficulty, we often ask, How does the Lord want me to move ahead? Do we bull our way forward, expecting God to clean up our mess? Do we sit still and do nothing, waiting for the Lord to intervene? Or do we move out in faith, leaning not on our own resources but trusting upon the Lord and his provision each step of the way?

This morning we continue our reflection on the beautiful Old Testament story of Ruth, which has had a few surprises and cliffhangers of its own. These are the same questions that Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz must deal with.

In chapter 1 we were introduced to a man from Bethlehem named Elimelek, his wife Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion. During a time of famine they left the land of promise and sought refuge in the neighboring pagan nation of Moab. While there, Elimelek died and his two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, neither of whom had children. After they had lived in Moab about ten years things went from bad to worse. Mahlon and Kilion died, leaving all three widows without a husband or sons.

In the midst of this great tragedy a glimmer of hope shone as the Lord in his mercy and compassion ended the famine in Israel. Orpah chose to stay with her Moabite family and gods, but Ruth demonstrated amazing loyalty and faith by clinging to Naomi and devoting herself to the God and people of Israel. They arrived back in Bethlehem just as the harvest season was beginning.

In chapter 2 we saw how Ruth ventured out one day to glean. Thanks to the Lord's providence she happened upon the field of a righteous man named Boaz. With great warmth and affection he welcomed Ruth and invited her to glean exclusively in his fields, where he could protect her and provide for her.

Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's fields, but the chapter closes rather ominously. We read that the harvest season was coming to an end and Ruth still had no husband, and Naomi had no male heir to maintain the family property or preserve the family name. They had no means to support themselves. Their emptiness had not yet been filled.

How will the Lord see them through? The plot thickens when we discover that Boaz is a close relative of the family. We wonder will Boaz act to save them from their desperate situation? Is there anything Ruth and Naomi can do?

Chapter 3 begins with Naomi initiating with Ruth a plan they hope will influence Boaz to act on their behalf.

## I. Naomi's plan 3:1-5

**One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours?" (3:1-2a TNIV)**

Israelite parents often played an important role in the arrangements for their child's marriage (Gen 24:67, 27:46). Naomi is no exception. She genuinely cares for Ruth's welfare and wants her to find a husband and the comfort and security a new marriage will provide.

So Naomi takes on the responsibility to be Ruth's matchmaker—and she has her eyes set on Boaz. She begins by asking Ruth two rhetorical questions: "Should I not try to find a home for you where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz... a kinsman of ours?" The first question states the problem, the second the solution.

According to Israelite law and custom it was the responsibility of a near kinsman to redeem relatives who were in desperate need. One way a kinsman-redeemer could help a childless widow in his clan was to enter into a levirate marriage with her.

The details are given in Deuteronomy 25: "If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel" (Deut 25:5-6).

Naomi is hopeful that Boaz, a near kinsman of their family who has already shown favor to Ruth, would enter into a levirate marriage with her. He would be able to redeem them from both poverty and barrenness. So Naomi seized upon what she considered a God-given opportunity. She presented a detailed plan for how Ruth could influence Boaz into acting as their kinsman-redeemer.

**Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing-floor. Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing-floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do." "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. (3:2b-5)**

Naomi's plan is very bold; some may even consider it shocking. Boaz would be filled with good food and drink. Ruth, with perfume and nice clothes, would lie down next to him at the darkest hour of the night. It is not too much of a stretch to say that physical attraction and sexual temptation could be awakened.

Naomi certainly does not suggest anything immoral, but her plan is choreographed to maximize Ruth's desirability and minimize Boaz's defenses. It seems Naomi is expecting the combination of Ruth's youthful good looks and Boaz's post-party good mood to be the spark that ignites the flame toward marriage.

There is no mistaking that Naomi is asking Ruth to take an initiative that is both daring and dangerous. Naomi's open-ended scheme had a variety of possible outcomes with varying degrees of moral acceptability. What if Boaz rejects her or rebukes her for impropriety? What if he takes advantage of her sexually? What if nothing happens but people find out they spent the night together?

Given such a risky plan we would not be surprised at all if Ruth gave Naomi an outright refusal to participate in such a scheme. However, Ruth does not refuse. In fact, she says, "I will do whatever you say." Ruth was willing to put both her reputation and personal safety at risk in order to remain loyal to Naomi and her family. She trusts herself to Naomi, to Boaz, and ultimately to God. What unfolds could be either a great tragedy or great fulfillment. Which will it be?

## II. Ruth's request 3:6-9

**So she went down to the threshing-floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. (3:6-7)**

Just as Naomi had anticipated, after a long day of work followed by a night of celebration Boaz was in a good mood. To protect the barley from thievery, he lay down at the far end of the pile of grain and fell asleep. Under the cover of darkness Ruth stealthily approached, uncovered his feet and lay down. The suspense builds.

**In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer." (3:8-9)**

We don't know how long Ruth was at his feet, but sometime in the middle of the night Boaz awoke suddenly (presumably from having cold feet) and in a moment of startling surprise discovered a woman lying at his feet. Struggling under the darkness and fog of sleep, Boaz does not recognize Ruth and in utter confusion asks, "Who are you?"

Here is where Ruth's actions diverge from Naomi's instructions in a very important and key way. Instead of remaining quiet, Ruth steps out and speaks her own lines. She proves she is not Naomi's puppet. She has her own identity as a woman of faith.

Ruth made her intentions clear from the beginning. With a humble spirit she identifies herself as his servant Ruth, and then moves directly to her bold request: "spread the corner of your garment over me since you are a kinsman-redeemer."

In the Ancient Near East, the custom of placing the corner of a garment over a woman was a symbolic act reflecting the commitment of marriage. It is the rough equivalent of giving of an engagement ring in our culture.

This same metaphor is used by the Lord in his word of love to his people in Jerusalem: "Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine" (Ezek 16:8).

By using this metaphor Ruth echoed Boaz's prayer for her when they first met in the harvest field: "May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge" (Ruth 2:12).

The Hebrew word for "wing" and "garment" are the same. In essence, Ruth is asking Boaz, "Will you become the answer to your own prayer for my blessing? Take me under your wing, and be God's instrument of protection, provision, and care for me. Boaz, marry me."

Ruth has laid it all on the line. She could not be more vulnerable than at this moment. We hold our breath with her, wondering how Boaz will respond to this unexpected and highly unusual proposal of marriage? Will he take advantage of her? Will he be angry and reject her?

## III. Boaz's response 3:10-15

**"The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. (3:10-11)**

In the deep darkness of night, Boaz's godliness shines bright. Though this scene on the threshing floor is filled with sexual and emotional tension, Boaz is a man of integrity. The first words out of his mouth are a blessing. He praises Ruth because, even though she could have found a husband and home with any of the most eligible bachelors in Bethlehem, she was offering herself to him, a near kinsman, in order to save the family name. This was even a greater expression of her loyal-love for Naomi than leaving her homeland and coming to Israel.

Even though Naomi encouraged Ruth to accentuate her outward beauty, Boaz responded to her inward beauty. It was her loyal-love and godliness, not her nice clothes, perfume or good looks that lured him to be God's man for her. You can hear in his words how much he deeply admires Ruth.

But Boaz was not the only one impressed by Ruth. Evidently, the whole town agreed that she was a "woman of noble character." What an amazing testimony of Ruth's integrity and devotion

that she had achieved such a high reputation among the townspeople!

Ruth has taken the very brave initiative, and Boaz has responded with grace, compassion, and tremendous respect. They are harmonious in character and seem to be a perfect match. But wait. There is a problem. Just when we think we are in for a lovely Jane Austen kind of ending, to our great surprise we read there is a potential roadblock to their union.

**“Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning.” (3:12-13)**

Boaz informed Ruth that there was a barrier to his acting as kinsman-redeemer for her. Although he was a close relative of Naomi’s deceased husband, there was another relative who was even closer.

According to the Torah, this other relative had first responsibility to act as redeemer for Naomi and her family. So Boaz, being a righteous man of integrity with great concern for covenant loyalty to all members of his clan, including this nearer kinsman, revealed to Ruth that he must give this other man the opportunity to decide first.

With this new information we now understand why Boaz had not himself taken the initiative to propose earlier to Ruth. According to the custom he had no right to initiate this role, but now that Ruth has asked him to be her kinsman-redeemer he is free to pursue her redemption.

To reassure Ruth that he was serious, Boaz made a solemn and binding oath promising he that he will redeem her if the nearer kinsman should refuse. Even though he was eager to marry Ruth he trusted God for the outcome. This does not mean he will wait passively for this near kinsman to act. Quite to the contrary, he will resolve the issue that very morning.

It would have been unsafe for Ruth to return back home to Naomi at midnight, so Boaz asks her to remain until morning. Not only does Boaz protect Ruth from any potential physical harm, he protects her reputation.

**So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, “Don’t let it be known that a woman came to the threshing-floor.” He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town. (3:13-15)**

Not wanting anyone to misinterpret this nighttime encounter, Boaz sent Ruth away before anyone could recognize her in the morning light, but not before filling her shawl with a bounty of grain. He literally heaps blessing on Ruth. It is quite amazing that throughout this entire book Ruth never departs Boaz’s presence empty handed. She always walks away with abundance.

The story of Ruth and Boaz is not the traditional “boy meets girl” romantic love story. Nor is it a “how to” manual on Christian courtship. But in a world where integrity and sexual purity

are mocked I believe men and women can learn from the way Boaz and Ruth related to each other.

It is clear from their encounters and conversations together that following the ways of the Lord was at the center of their relationship. Boaz consistently blessed Ruth, praised her, protected her, and provided for her. He spoke tenderly to her, was generous with her, and both publicly and privately treated her with tremendous honor and respect.

Likewise, Ruth trusted Boaz to do the right thing and respected him enough to appeal to his high desires not his base passions. Neither of them tried to manipulate or deceive each other into getting what they wanted. They were a man and woman of integrity and noble character, and treated each other accordingly.

Loyal-love was at the root of their actions toward one another. For many people today “love” is illusive. They substitute sex for love and lose in the exchange. In a world where sexual passion and romantic feelings pass for “true love” we all need to remember the description of love given to us by the apostle Paul: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (1 Cor 13:4-7).

This is the kind of love expressed between Boaz and Ruth, and the kind of love that shines bright in a world that loves the darkness. After Boaz fills Ruth’s shawl with grain he immediately goes into town to find this nearer kinsman and she heads home to a very curious Naomi.

#### IV. Ruth’s return to Naomi (3:16-18)

**When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’” Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.” (3:16-18)**

We can imagine that it was a sleepless night for Naomi. She was wondering if her plan had been successful or not. When Ruth finally arrived home, Naomi asked, literally, “Who are you, my daughter?” Are you Mahlon’s widow or are you Boaz’s betrothed? This is the second time in just a matter of hours that Ruth has been asked the question, “Who are you?” It is a difficult question to answer precisely because Ruth has been guaranteed that she will be married, but she does not know yet to whom.

As Ruth tells Naomi all that Boaz had done for her she points to the abundance of grain in her shawl and repeated Boaz’s words, “Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.” Boaz knew that behind Ruth was Naomi, and he wanted to assure them both that their days of emptiness were coming to an end.

Naomi sees the overwhelming evidence of Boaz’s loyal-love and counsels Ruth to sit tight. Naomi has confidence that no obstacle will keep Boaz from fulfilling his promise. Though they don’t know exactly what the future holds, they wait patiently because Boaz is a man they can believe in and trust.

Most Bible stories have surprises, cliffhangers, and plot twists. The book of Ruth, and this chapter in particular, gives ample evidence that as the work of God advances obstacles often appear in the way.

This is true for our life as well. Sometimes our trials are a result of forces beyond our control and sometimes they are of our own making. How we respond to these challenges reveals a lot about our faith and trust in the Lord.

The Bible is filled with examples of men and women the Lord used who faced the trials before them with initiative, boldness, and confidence. They stepped out in faith, relying on the provision of God and sensitive to the guiding hand of the Spirit. As Dr. Bruce Waltke says, "Creative risk taking is part of God's providence."<sup>1</sup>

Naomi and Ruth definitely took a risk of faith in approaching Boaz on the threshing floor; Boaz, eager to marry Ruth, took a risk of losing her by bringing her situation to the nearer-kinsman first. I am amazed at how God rewarded their steps of faith.

Generally, I am not a risk-taker. I tend to be quite conservative and conventional in the way I live. I often play it safe and go with the "tried-and-true." In most instances this works out pretty well. I get average results and am often congratulated for being even-keeled and level headed.

But there is a dark side to this as well. I hate to admit it, but I think in many ways my conservative approach often betrays a lack of trust and confidence in the Lord. I'm afraid that if I reach too far I will fail. And if I fail, I'm afraid that I will be unwanted and rejected.

This lack of trust in the Lord is even evident at times in my ministry here at PBCC. A few years back, after going through my evaluation process with the elders, I received their report on a small scroll that had just a few words on it, but they were powerful: "We love you Andy, Risk More." The scroll hangs on the wall in my office because it is an exhortation I constantly need. The Lord continues to work on me in this area. He is so patient with me.

I've been greatly helped in this area by the reflections of John Ortberg, from a yet to be published book, "The Me I Want To Be": "Letting God lead is not the same thing as passivity. Part of God's will for my life is that I be active, that I make choices, that I exercise creativity and initiative. It does not mean I let other people walk over me or accept circumstances fatalistically; often it means I will have to fight to challenge the status quo... By inviting God to lead I am being freed from the burden of how things turn out. And the way God leads me will not quite be like the way he leads anyone else."

Where is God leading you to step out with risky and creative faith? The encouragement I received from the elders is the same as I'll pass on to you, "Risk More." Not risk more in your stock picks, but risk more in your faith in the Lord.

We have nothing to be afraid of, because the Lord loves us. Throughout the Bible he encourages his people by telling them not to be afraid for he is always with them. As you reach out to those around you at home, at your gym, in your neighborhood, at school and work, and in this church, be bold in your love. Be bold in your compassion, your generosity, and your witness.

We cannot love this way or risk this way in our own strength, so the question asked twice of Ruth is the one I ask of you, "Who are you? To Whom do you belong?"

If you have given your life to Christ, then you are a child of God. You have been redeemed by him and you can step out in faith, confident in his love and the empowering presence of his Holy Spirit within you. "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). We act boldly not to earn our redemption, but because of our redemption.

"Who are you?" There may be some of you who are not attached to the Lord, yet you recognize your desperate need for a Redeemer and Savior. I have good news for you. Though you struggle under the poverty of sin and hopelessness, your heavenly Father wants to set you free to a new life. I invite you to give your life to Christ. You can approach him with great confidence in his mercy, grace, and boundless love. Don't worry about trying to get your life together first. It is not your attractiveness or righteousness that lures God to redeem you; it is his love for you through Jesus Christ.

How wonderful to have a Redeemer in whom we can rest. What joy and peace we have knowing that he is accomplishing his good work in and through us. It is his work entirely. We are free to live each day, and in any circumstance, with bold faith, glorifying our Heavenly Father who loves us without fail.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Light from the Dark Ages: An Exposition on Judges and Ruth* (lecture notes, BIBL 615, Summer School 2004).