

“Redeemed by Self-Giving Love” based on Ruth 4:1-17 and Mark 10:42-45

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on November 17, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

I saw a commercial that said, “Forget everything you know about slip covers.” So, I did. And it was a load off my mind. Then the commercial tried to sell slipcovers, but I didn’t know what they were.

I stole this bit from the late comedian Mitch Hedberg to make a point: I want you to forget everything you think you know about Ruth. Or at least, I want us all to forget one common interpretation. I want us all to forget the romantic story of Boaz and Ruth falling in love.

You see, this is not a love story. No. It is not. However, it is a story that is entirely about love – God’s love, and how the faithful – those who truly believe in God – carry out this love. This is the love that caused the Apostle Paul to say to the Philippians, “Do nothing from selfish ambition, but always regard others better than yourselves.” It’s the love that prompted Paul to tell the Romans, “Love one another with mutual affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

This is not the story of a man seeing a woman, falling in love, and waiting for his chance. No, this is a story of heartache, pain, struggle, and the perseverance of self-giving love. This self-giving love is the foundation of the Kingdom of God. This is why Jesus in our reading from Mark responds to the apostles bickering about their power and their status in the Kingdom of God. He tells them that they are not to think power over others is God’s way. Yes, they will reign with Jesus, but not with earthly power.

In the King James, it says, “those accounted to rule over gentiles,” and the NRSV says, “among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers.” This weird phrase is hard to translate cleanly, and if we take it literally, Jesus discounts the power of those in authority. When Mark records him saying, “*dokuntes archein tone ethnon*,” it means, “those who seem to rule the nations.”

Jesus says that worldly means of power are not real. True power is exercised not in commanding others by status or authority, but in service, ministering to others, supporting others, even to total submission. Even Jesus – the Son of Man – fully equal to God, became a human being. He came not to be served, or ministered to, or supported, but to serve, minister and support, even to the point of giving his life as a ransom, a redemption, for many on the cross.

This is at the heart of the book of Ruth. It is the story of the distant ancestors of Jesus who revealed and even preserved that God is King 3,100 years ago. This is why I said to forget everything you think you know about Ruth. You see, for too long, we’ve tried to fit this story in our modern context. We apply our views of women, marriage, and even cultural safety nets, and try to squeeze this multi-faceted story into a simple mold. But in truth, as quite a few commentators and authors have shown, especially Carolyn Custis James in “the Gospel of Ruth,” we have far more to gain in understanding this story, if we view it in the time in which it occurred without a superimposed modern love story.

The story is centered on two widows – Naomi, an Israelite, and Ruth, a Moabite. Naomi, her two sons, and her husband Elimelech, from the tribe of Judah, escape their hometown of Bethlehem during a famine and move to Moab. In a global economy, it is hard for us to imagine life during a famine. We were shocked when we saw empty store shelves during COVID, but imagine almost no

food at all, with people starving, even the wealthy, hoping someone could grow something or acquire food in time, before the entire city starved to death.

Elimelech and his family abandoned their fields which were producing nothing and ran to live in a place where they could at least find food to survive – Moab. They may not have intended to stay long but ended up making a life there. Moab was an enemy of Israel and was said to worship a god that demanded human sacrifice, even children. It may have seemed strange that such a people, worshiping such a seemingly evil god might be prospering, while the people who worshiped the Lord, were starving in Judah.

Yet, it was in Moab they found food. But also, it was in Moab that Elimelech died, making Naomi a widow. Her sons then found wives in Moab – Ruth and Orpah. As foreigners without a father to arrange the marriage, it is not likely Naomi's sons found brides with any status. This may be the one space to fit in a love story, since they were not prospects for an arranged marriage. So it is that after 10 years, both sons died, and neither Ruth, nor Orpah, had any children.

At this point, Naomi, who is very much like Job in the suffering she endures, believes that God has turned away from her. She believes her only hope then is to return to her homeland to die among her people. She wants to do what is best for her daughters-in-law and releases them. As widows without children, they have little to offer in marriage because they would be considered barren. Their best opportunity is to return to their fathers to help raise nieces and nephews in support of the family or in support of any family business or trade.

Ruth and Orpah refuse – Naomi insists – but only Orpah goes back to her family. Ruth says to Naomi, “Where you go, I’ll go. Where you stay, I’ll stay. Your God will be my God, and your people will be my people.” Here is Ruth, choosing the harder path out of love for her mother-in-law. What’s more, she doesn’t just choose to help her, but she commits even to Naomi’s God and Naomi’s people. She does this knowing that Naomi believes God has turned against her. Ruth worships for and with Naomi. She does this knowing Naomi’s people hate Moabites. They are enemies, but she says Naomi’s people will be hers.

Ruth acts without any selfish ambition, but regards Naomi’s welfare more than her own. Naomi offers love to Ruth and Orpah by giving them the freedom to find security with their own families. But Ruth, in mutual affection, outdoes her mother-in-law and goes with her. They arrive in Bethlehem, and Naomi tells people of her grief. Ruth offers to go out and glean some grain to help feed them.

She ends up on a field owned by Boaz, one of Elimelech’s relatives. Now, in Leviticus, it says that after the reapers and the gatherers go through a field, any food left in the field should be picked up by widows, orphans and the poor. But in the text Ruth goes into the field behind the reapers. It seems she doesn’t wait for the gatherers and is taking first fruits.

When Boaz shows up and wonders who this is, he’s not asking, “Hey, who is this lovely lady?” He’s asking who she is to be breaking the rules. What are you doing letting her take first fruits? They say she is the Moabite who came home with Naomi. She had asked permission to glean behind the reapers, and the workers let her, marveling at her work ethic. Boaz wisely tells her not to go to any other field to glean as they may not like her taking first fruits and treat her as well as he will.

Instead, Boaz tells his workers to let her harvest behind them, and for them to help her. He even allows her to share a meal with him and the workers. The text says Ruth gathered an Epha, which was more than 25lbs of barley. A typical gleaner might get enough for one meal or two. She walked out with 25lbs. She went out to work on behalf of her mother-in-law, and in recognition of her selflessness, Boaz, outdoes her generosity with his own. Ruth stays with Boaz's women gatherers, throughout the whole harvest.

Some time later, Naomi decides she needs to do what is best for Ruth once again. She tries to release her by telling her to set aside her clothes of mourning, and go to the threshing floor where Boaz is sleeping and uncover his feet. Naomi tells Ruth to do whatever Boaz asks of her.

Now, here's where we really need to set aside our cultural expectations here to really understand this. First, the most likely scenario here is that Boaz is likely already married, possibly with multiple wives. Polygamous marriage was common during this time, and his status as a community leader would not be one attained by a single man without any heirs.

Second, this was 1,100 BC, so there was no marriage ceremony. Two consenting, free individuals, with family blessing, could begin a marriage simply by consummating it. Naomi sends Ruth with her blessing, to go to Boaz and get married that night so that she can live in his estate.

But once again, Ruth outdoes her mother-in-law in showing love to her. Ruth goes to Boaz, but she does not wait for him to tell her what to do. She tells him that he should redeem Elimelech's land by marrying her. Ruth seeks to be a surrogate for Naomi in marrying Boaz, so that Naomi and Elimelech are preserved. The name of the dead is at stake here.

Essentially, rather than Ruth marrying Boaz for his sake or her own, Ruth asks Boaz to marry her as if he were marrying Naomi, so that if they have a male heir, that child would preserve Naomi's and Elimelech's family land. Boaz agrees to Ruth's request, again recognizing the love Ruth is showing for Naomi. Boaz could have married Ruth with no strings attached, but to do what Ruth has asked, Boaz must offer it first to Elimelech's closest relative.

So Boaz goes out to the city gate to make a deal. The city gates were the equivalent to town hall or our city council chamber. There Boaz sees the closest relative to Elimelech. He tells him to wait there, and Boaz gets some elders. He draws together a decision-making body.

What's interesting is that in the Hebrew, Boaz address the man as "Hey A Certain Someone," which was translated today as, "Hey So and So." Elimelech's other cousin becomes a man with no name. Hebrew scholars have referred to him as "Mr. No Name." Boaz offers him the opportunity to have Elimelech's land. The man says yes, but when Boaz says Ruth is part of the deal, the man rejects it and thereby rejects the opportunity to be in King David's family line.

In the end, he has no name. He is forgotten to history. He doesn't preserve Elimelech's land rights. The man says this would ruin his inheritance, meaning that if she has a child, then anything he invests in the field would be lost from his own heirs. No one would blame him for refusing the deal. He is prioritizing his family.

However, Boaz goes above and beyond. Boaz accepts the deal even if it limits the inheritance he can pass on to his other children. We never get to know the kinsman redeemer's real name and

Elimelech's is preserved. Boaz is authorized by the elders to take the land and to marry Ruth in the deal. Mr. No Name is lost to history, while Boaz is known to history as the great grandfather of King David, and by extension, in the family tree of the Messiah Jesus.

Beloved, this story builds on what Carol Ann preached last week with the widow's two coins, because at each step along the way, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz gave more than expected. They gave sacrificially of their lives, to fulfill the Spirit of God's law. Boaz and Ruth have a child, whom the women of the town name, "Obed," meaning "servant." It can also mean, "worker" or "worshiper," and in any case, it fits the story that led to his birth, because each person involved was serving one another, working for God's purpose, and in doing so, offering true worship.

In the end, we see that the child was seen as Naomi's child. Ruth gives up the baby so her mother in law can preserve Elimelech's land. This is the same land on which the young shepherd David was watching sheep before he was called home, so that the prophet Samuel could anoint David to be the future King. What's more, if Joseph was indeed returning to his ancestral lands, perhaps it was again on Elimelech's land that Jesus was born.

This is all very fitting, considering too that the meaning of Elimelech, is that, "God is King." Beloved, the Kingdom of God is not about meeting the demands of different rules for a checklist, but living in a manner that reflects the full image of God as revealed in Jesus. It's an image of self-giving love – which is the foundation of God's very being.

We are not called to have power by authority over others, but to love as Christ loves, knowing that he loved us first. We can do whatever it takes to love, just as Ruth did, overcoming every obstacle to serve God, regardless of how others might marginalize or dismiss others, to instead help by doing our part to build the Kingdom of God through self-giving love. Amen