

7 May 2017

The Giver

The Book of Ruth; Mark 3:31-35

The church has traditionally been seen as a pro-family institution, and justly so. We do believe in families. In fact, we believe in families beyond families. Hear this incident in the life of Christ, from Mark 3, verses 31-35:

31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' ³³And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!' ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

I have to start off today's story with some background. Our tale takes place in the time of the "Judges" in Israel, which was the period after Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land but before Israel had a king. That means that just before this story took place, Israel was setting out to wipe out every non-Israelite in the land because they were dangerous and might teach Israel to worship other gods. Foreign women were especially dangerous, apparently, because there are a lot of laws against Israelites having anything to do with *those* women. This was also a time before Israel had a standing army, led by a king, so they were vulnerable and were constantly being attacked by neighboring nations. For instance, in Judges 3, we read about Eglon the King of Moab oppressed Israel until the judge Ehud assassinated him. So it seems to have been a rough time, and foreigners were always the enemy.

Hardship wasn't restricted foreigners, though. There was also starvation. That's how the Book of Ruth starts: with a famine in Israel, which was so bad that one man from Bethlehem named Elimelech left home and became a refugee. Taking his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and his wife Naomi, he emigrated to the land of Moab. Sure, the Moabites were foreigners, but they had food; can you blame him? Then, in Moab, Elimelech died. The family stayed in Moab, though: in fact, his sons married two of those foreign women, named Orpah and Ruth, and settled in, making a new home in Moab. But disaster followed disaster, because then Mahlon and Chilion died, leaving poor Naomi bereaved of both husband and sons.

Please understand what this meant to Naomi. It wasn't just grief at the loss of loved ones. Family was that society's only plan for old age. There was no Social Security. Without a husband or sons, she was going into her declining years without resources or support. In despair, she turned her eyes toward Bethlehem and called her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

"I wanted to tell you both that I'm going home," she said.

"We'll go with you," they replied.

Naomi took a deep breath. "You're very sweet, but you can't do that," she said. "Look, you're still young. You can marry again and bear children so that when you're old, you at least

may have someone to take care of you. Stay here. Start a new life. My life is over; that's no reason yours should be."

Both daughters-in-law wept, but in the end Orpah did the smart thing. She said goodbye and went back to her father's household, where there might be hope for her future. But Ruth refused. "No," she said. "I won't separate my life from yours. Where you go, I will go. Where you sleep, I will sleep. Your people will be mine. Your God will be mine. And your life isn't over, because you will always share it with me." And now you understand what Ruth was doing, don't you? By leaving her home and going to a strange land that was already suspicious of foreigners, she was effectively giving up the possibility of ever having a spouse or children to care for her as she aged. But she was willing to risk dying alone and unloved if she could keep Naomi from that fate. So the two women went to Bethlehem.

In Israel at that time there was a law forbidding rich landowners to reap all their fields or glean all the grapes from their vines. The corners of the fields and edges of the vineyards were to be left untouched in the harvest – for the sake of the hungry. The idea was that those who had more than they needed bore a responsibility for those who did not have enough. Well, Ruth and Naomi had nothing, but they arrived in Bethlehem at about the time of the barley harvest, so when the harvesters went out to glean the fields, Ruth followed behind them, hoping to gather a few heads of grain and to pick up what was left on the fringe of the harvest. As it happened, she chose the field of a wealthy man named Boaz. All morning she followed along behind the harvesters, gathering their leavings. At noon, when they stopped for lunch, she paused, too. She had nothing to eat herself, so she just waited. And during lunch, Boaz himself came out to see how the work was going.

"Who's that woman?" he asked the workers.

One of them replied, "Oh that's that foreign woman who came back with Naomi."

Boaz looked more closely. "I've heard about her."

The others snickered. "You know what they say about foreign women."

Boaz didn't laugh. "I've heard that she left her home and family to take care of Naomi and that she's been working any horrible job she can find so that she and Naomi can eat," he said. He looked around at his workers. "Boys? I want you to leave her alone. Do you hear me? I will know if you disobey. And every now and then, toss out a good sheaf of grain for her to gather. Why? Because I said so. Do you need another reason? Or another job?"

Then he took a piece of bread from the lunch basket and walked over to where Ruth sat. They looked at each other for a moment. Boaz said, "It isn't always safe for a woman alone. But I've told my workers to stay away from you, so you should glean every day in my fields. My name is Boaz. Here. You should eat something." Boaz turned on his heel and walked away.

That night Naomi couldn't believe how much grain Ruth brought back. "Where did you get all that? Did the harvesters really leave that much behind? Were they incompetent? Whose field did you go to?"

"He said his name was Boaz."

"Boaz," Naomi repeated. "But he's one of my husband's relatives . . ."

Now this was not just a casual observation. Genealogy wasn't a hobby to ancient Israel. As we've seen, family was supposed to take care of each other, and even if you didn't have any immediate family, your next closest relative bore at least some level of responsibility for you. For instance, if you fell into debt, your *go'el* or "kinsman redeemer" was supposed to buy you out of debt if possible. Now, Boaz wasn't Elimelech's next closest relative, but he was close, which is why Naomi suddenly got thoughtful.

So Ruth worked in Boaz's fields until the harvest was done, and on the night of the last day of harvest, Boaz called his workers together for a feast. They ate and they drank. Drank a good bit, apparently, because Boaz decided not to bother going home but just curled up to sleep on the threshing floor, where the feast had been held. Waking up at midnight, Boaz found something warm at his feet. "Hello?" he said. "Who's there?"

It was Ruth. Naomi had sent her. "Just do what I say. Wash up, put on clean clothes, then go find where Boaz lay down to sleep after the harvest feast. He won't have made it home. Don't say anything. Just lay at his feet and do what he tells you." Yeah, I know. Those instructions are a little ambiguous aren't they? Even suspicious. It's almost as if Naomi's sending Ruth out to take advantage of Boaz while he's drunk and seduce him. Now the text doesn't *say* that's what Naomi is thinking, but that interpretation makes more sense than any innocent explanation that I can come up with. Fortunately, it hardly matters what Naomi thought she was planning, because Ruth didn't follow her instructions. When Boaz woke up and said, "Who's there?" Ruth replied in a direct fashion. "It is I. Ruth. I've come to ask for your protection. I ask you to serve as kinsman redeemer and to take me into your care." In other words, she said, "I am Ruth. Will you marry me?"

Most of the rest of the story in the book of Ruth is about how Boaz handled the required paperwork. It turns out that he couldn't take on the "kinsman redeemer" role because there was someone else with a closer family connection. So Boaz had to wheel and deal a bit, to get that man to sign over his family rights to Boaz. I especially love the part where Boaz tells his cousin, "Oh, by the way, if you want to maintain the redeemer role, you're going to need to marry that foreign woman." In this way, Boaz takes the one thing he wanted most and presents it as a disqualifier. It works. In the end, Boaz is granted rights to Elimelech's inheritance and debts and promptly marries Ruth. They take Naomi in so that she is cared for for the rest of her life. They have children who will care for Boaz and Ruth, and their children have children. In fact, the grandson of Boaz and Ruth, his foreign wife, was named Jesse, and one of Jesse's sons was named David, who would go on to become Israel's greatest king. At least until, a thousand years later, one of Boaz's and Ruth's descendants, who was born in a stable in Bethlehem, would be even greater.

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I have to admit that the reason I told this story today is because it's a great story and I like telling stories. I do remember, though, that this is officially a sermon, and so I'm supposed to draw some lesson from it to enrich your faith and your lives. And yes, I know that's a little silly. You're all perfectly capable of drawing your own lessons from a story, and you probably already have. But here I go anyway: Loving another person, as Ruth loved Naomi, always involves sacrifice – giving yourself to that person. And that takes courage, because it means putting that person's future before your own. Do it anyway. And then watch to see what miracles God will work with that sort of gift.