

Risk and Redemption  
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Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

November 8, 2009

San Dimas Community Church, United Church

Last Sunday we left Naomi and Ruth as Ruth promises to travel back to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. Remember that many years before, Naomi had left Bethlehem which means “the house of bread” because there was no bread there; there was famine. Naomi and her husband went to the land of Moab, and there she bore two sons who grew up and married Moabite women.

Then tragedy strikes; Naomi’s husband and sons die, and now as a foreigner and widow Naomi’s only hope for survival is to return once more to Bethlehem where the famine has ended. In Bethlehem she has kinfolk who may take her in. And beyond any reasonable expectation or rational thought, Naomi’s daughter-in-law, Ruth, takes an oath that wherever Naomi goes, she, too, will go. Now we must remember that the Moabites were enemies of the Hebrew people. Naomi’s sons have chosen wives of the enemy; indeed, these are “mixed marriages” in both faith and ethnicity. In Deut. 23:3 it says: ***No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.*** Yet, we find in this story extravagant hospitality, fidelity, and amazing grace.

In spite of great odds, the two women survived the treacherous journey from Moab back to Bethlehem, and there, even as an outsider, Ruth, found a way within the Hebrew social order to provide food for herself and Naomi. The poor were allowed to follow behind those reaping the grain and pick up the shreds of grain dropped or missed, a kind of second harvest. By doing this, Ruth was able to gather enough food for the two women to eat. But it wasn’t just any field Ruth chose to glean; it was the field of Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi. Ruth was a hard worker and she gained the admiration of the grain reapers as well as Boaz when he came out one day to greet his workers. Boaz asks who Ruth is, and then he offers her protection by telling the young men to leave her alone.

It is hard for us to imagine just how vulnerable Ruth, a young and foreign woman, was in that time and place. (Unless, of course, we think about a high school sophomore in Richmond, California.) Boaz offers extravagant hospitality and protection to Ruth so that she and Naomi can survive.

In ancient Hebrew culture not only was there a sort of “second harvest” but also there was a social security system of sorts. If a woman’s husband died, the husband’s brother or next of kin assumed responsibility for the widow woman. He took her as his own wife and became her “redeemer”. This was the covenant outlined in the Hebrew Torah, Hebrew law.

But there is a real sense that in this story, the characters go beyond simply following the law, and offer what Tom emphasizes in Bible study as *hesed*. *Hesed* is faithfulness and loyalty beyond any desire for reciprocity. It is pure in its intentions and motives; it seeks the well-being of the other. Throughout this short, four chapter book of the Bible, we read a beautiful and moving account of the letter of the law combined with the spirit of the law applied to everyday life.

The last few verses of this Book tell a great revelation: Ruth and Boaz marry and Ruth conceives a son whose name is Obed, who has a son named Jesse, who has a son named David. This foreign woman, courageous and loyal, becomes the great-grandmother of King David. She becomes a crucial part of God’s salvation history for the Jewish nation and for those of us inheritors of the Judeo-Christian history.

Reinhold Niebuhr was a noted theologian of the 20th century and influential during the time of World War II. He was a theologian in the day when famous scholars of faith and religion were invited to the White House to advise on moral issues. At last Wednesday night’s Bible

study I learned Reinhold Neibuhr's definition of justice which is this: *justice is love making its way in the world*. This seems to bring together the covenant law and *hesed* as a way of making God's presence real in our world.

There are many amazing themes in this story of Ruth and Naomi. One is that they don't start out as royalty but as ordinary people doing what is necessary for their family's survival and doing what their faith calls upon them to do. There is a determination and matter-of-factness about what must be done, and they rise to the occasion.

It is reassuring to know that we ordinary folk living our ordinary lives have a place in God's history. We may not know how or when or what, but we don't have to know, we just have to trust. Ruth died not knowing she was the great-grandmother of the greatest King of Israel. Shakespeare said, "whate're thy part, act it well." We may not think our lives and our actions matter; but they matter immensely. When we bring together God's covenant with *hesed*, we participate in *justice which is love making its way in the world*. God is able to take us as we are and if we open our hearts to the divine, we become part of something much greater than ourselves. We can become part of God's dream for the world.

Another important theme of this story is risk. These women were risk-takers. They had great courage. For Ruth to go into Boaz in the middle of the night and lie beside him so that she could ask him to spread his "wing" (meaning his cloak, a symbol of betrothal) over her for the sake of Naomi and herself, was a bold risk. Ruth is no shrinking violet. She and Naomi are wise women who take intelligent risks to make their way in a hostile world.

Another important theme is that of prayer. Three times prayer is woven into the lives of these ancient people in a way in which it seems that all life is a prayer. The first prayer is when Naomi encourages her daughter-in-laws to return home and prays that God will grant them security with new husbands.

It's not the bowing ones head, folding hands kind of prayer. It's a natural flowing forth of pray as a way of speaking and being. The second prayer is when Naomi returns to Bethlehem all are amazed and asks "is this Naomi." Tom assures me that her answer is in the form of a prayer; but it sounds like a complaint: *Call me Mara (which means bitter) for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty*. It's kind of a "woe is me" prayer. I imagine Ruth standing on the sidelines thinking to herself; am I nothing? Ruth has given all that she has, herself, to the survival of her mother-in-law. The irony is that Ruth provides for Naomi's survival. But the comforting aspect of this prayer is that perhaps even complaining is OK with God. The angst of everyday life, even complaints, become a way of prayer.

The third prayer is Boaz' prayer when he recognizes Ruth's hard work and fidelity to her mother-in-law and says: *May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!* Again, prayer and daily communication flow together. Later Ruth turns this prayer around and asks Boaz *spread your wing (cloak) over your servant, for you are next of kin*. The wings of the God of Israel become very real as the wings of Boaz, Ruth's redeemer.

This wonderful story reminds us that God can take us as we are and make of us something extraordinary and beautiful, and even if we should not live to see the end of the story, we trust that we are important to God's story; and it is more than enough.