

It'll Never Fly (Ruth#4)

July 10, 2016

Ruth 3:1-17; Philippians 2:1-4

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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It's all in the story of Ruth, but if you've not been here as we've studied this book, it's not just the story of Ruth. It's all over the news in 2016, too.

Famine leads to despair, and despair creates refugees. Refugee camps and slums lead to more violence and death, which in turn creates more long-term poverty and systemic dislocation, which breeds resentment and ethnic hatred.

It's what happened to Naomi, Elimilech, and their family; it's what has happened to 60 million people on the planet this morning. So even if you've never heard of Naomi or Boaz or Ruth, I know you've heard this story of famine and refugees before.



¹In the book of Ruth, these challenges provide our hero, Ruth, with an opportunity to work that leads to encouraging the community to structure itself so that there is a better chance for long term healing, growth, and survival.

Now, so far in our story, the driving force has been Ruth's desire to care for Naomi, the destitute and elderly widow who at first finds herself bereft in a foreign land, but eventually comes home to Bethlehem. While they were still in Moab, Ruth promised all she was and ever would have to ensuring her mother-in-law's survival. When they moved to the land of Judah, Ruth took it upon herself to go out and look for food to sustain the two of them. Thus far, our story has been about Ruth's devotion to

¹ *Whither Thou Goest*, Sandy Freckleton Gagon (contemporary)

Naomi.

Today, there is a slightly different angle that emerges. For what is really the first time, Naomi voices her concern for Ruth's security and future. I know that back in chapter one she said that she had Ruth's best interests at heart when she tried to send the younger woman away, but when we read that, it sure sounded as if Naomi was so trapped in her own grief that she was simply driving everyone away from her, rather than genuinely caring about her daughter-in-law.



²Yet in our reading for this morning, Naomi lays out the beginnings of a course of action for Ruth to follow. It's as if the older woman is saying, "OK, you might not know this, but *this* is how we do things here in Judah. You're going to have to trust me and do just as I say, even if it seems strange to you..."

Now, I should probably include this caveat every single time I open my mouth, but it's important to note this morning that there are a lot of ways to view the events that are described here in Ruth 3. If you'd like, I will invite you into my study to consider the perspectives of a number of authors who are way smarter than I am and who choose to read this scenario differently. Yet as I overlay the passage at hand with the life of this community and the needs of the world, I am choosing to view this part of our story with an eye toward seeing the main characters as individuals who are willing to take personal risks that result in opportunities for someone else to thrive. I believe that this is a story about people who could have chosen to focus in on personal gain of one sort or another, but who decided to act in the someone else's best interest.

Naomi, in chapter three, strengthens Ruth even when there is no guarantee that Ruth will stick with Naomi in the days to

² *Ruth and Naomi*, Jacob Pichhadze (1969)

come. Right now, Ruth is going out and engaging in the menial labor of gleaning that provides Naomi (and Ruth) with three squares a day...but if Naomi's plan works, Ruth will have a measure of independence and freedom that will allow her to turn her back on her mother-in-law, should she so desire.

Similarly, Ruth is exceedingly trusting here in chapter three. She follows Naomi's advice, even when for all the world it appears as though the older woman is dressing her up like a prostitute and parading her through town. The whole plan hinges on Ruth's ability to have a private meeting with Boaz in a public space. Can you imagine what would happen to Ruth if the perception was that she was a vulnerable young foreign beauty who was looking to earn a few dollars by spending time with the field hands? There is a lot that could go wrong with Naomi's plan, and if it would go wrong, Ruth would surely bear the brunt of it.



³And Boaz has his own set of risks here. He's thought to be such an upright man, but what will happen if he's found in the fields with a gleaner-woman? He could have worried about becoming a public spectacle, but rather he chooses to be concerned for Ruth's honor and safety and for Naomi's well-being. In this private meeting, Boaz offers nothing but support and encouragement for Ruth even as he pledges to do the same publicly.

Each of the three main characters in this chapter had the opportunity to choose to act out of fear, mistrust, or selfishness, and yet each chose to risk reputation, future, or even self for the sake of others and the community.

If I may, I'd like to highlight a bit of fairly recent history as an example of how this kind of choice might look today, even if it is rare in our world.

³ *The Meeting of Ruth and Boaz*, Marc Chagall (1960)

Not long after modern Israel became independent, the first Arab-Israeli war broke out in 1948. For decades, Jews and Arabs traded violence and hatred. When he became US President in 1977, Jimmy Carter sought to broker an agreement that would lead to a lasting peace in the Middle East. He sought out meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat. Although there was initially some progress, the talks quickly stalled and it appeared as though things would always be as they had always been. President Carter's wife, Roslyn, suggested that the President invite these two old adversaries to a place that had become special to him, Camp David in Maryland.



For thirteen long days, the leaders of these three countries met in secret. It was an enormously risky process for each of them, because typically heads of state only show up at meetings once their "people" have determined the outcome and laid the ground rules. There were times when Sadat and Begin refused to talk with each other, and Carter carried notes from one to the other. But finally, on September 17, 1978 the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East" was signed by these three world leaders. Much of the world reacted with hope and a cautious optimism.

When the treaty was accepted by Israel, Egypt was punished by the other Arab nations. Not long afterwards, Anwar el-Sadat was assassinated by a member of his inner circle. It was a costly, costly peace process... but it remains a shining example of leaders who are seeking the best hope for peace and justice for all, and not merely seeking to increase their own influence or prestige. You can say, "Are you crazy, Carver? Do you know what they're doing in the Middle East?" I do. And I have crossed the border from Israel into Egypt, and I am here to tell you that it's a much better situation than most borders between Israel and her neighbors. Because men of courage and vision risked something.

Can you imagine anything like that in our own day? Three world leaders who are willing to take the time and energy and risk necessary to hammer out a complicated agreement? As you mull on that example from history, let me invite you to compare that narrative with that of the current day, where each of the major political parties in the United States has selected the most militaristic person possible to stand for election as president. If all you knew about the United States was what you read in the papers or saw on the news, you might conclude that a top priority for this “Christian nation” is making sure that we elect leaders who are prepared to bomb our enemies back to the stone age if that’s what’s necessary to preserve our power and prestige.

Let’s be honest: we worship power and prestige. We want to be best at everything, first in every line, and to have more than anyone else. We resent being inconvenienced, intruded upon, or asked to do something or love someone that isn’t to our liking. We believe that everyone ought to be treated more or less equal, or at least nearly as well as we are treated. We want to be safe and secure and comfortable – for God’s sake, we want to be comfortable.



And here comes Jesus, talking about humility and service and self-denial and personal sacrifice and caring for others ahead of yourself. Asking us – no, *expecting us* to get into line behind him and act like him when all we really we want is a ticket to heaven when we die. As if we would be comfortable living the life that he lived.

*Exactly! Did you see what they did to Jesus? I saw **The Passion of the Christ**. Wow, that was intense. And gross. No thanks, Jesus. I’m not into that.*

“...do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more honor to others than to yourselves. Do not be interested only in your own life, but be interested in the lives of

others.”

I’m telling you, for as much as all the politicians like to hang around Jesus at election time, the real Jesus couldn’t get elected as dogcatcher in this town.

And yet... and yet, there he is, saying over and over again, “Follow me.”

Allow me to conflate the stories of Jesus and the words of Paul and the narrative from Ruth and suggest that while the Gospel does not instruct us to simply roll over and denigrate ourselves, there is pretty clearly a biblical model here to extend yourself, to risk yourself, perhaps even to lose yourself on behalf of another.

You saw it already in the scripture reading: Naomi lent Ruth some of her “insider” privilege in the culture in which they lived. Ruth promised Naomi all of her youthful energy and devotion. Boaz shared deeply of his wealth and honor as he extended both his wallet and his reputation on behalf of these poor women.

So go ahead. I dare you. Look for ways to enter into someone else’s experience this week. Acquaint yourself with the sense of powerlessness and frustration that so many of our neighbors deal with day in and day out. You want ideas on how to do that?

Holocaust Survivor Elie Weisel died earlier this week. Although his life was complicated in all sorts of ways, you would do well to set aside an evening this week and read (or re-read) his short book called *Night*, which details the horrors of the treatment that the Jews received at the hands of the Nazis a couple of generations ago. And think about what that book says about the refugee camps and walls and fortresses of our own age and the people who would build them and those who profit from their existence.

And what about the other events that dominated much of this week's headlines: the death of several young black men as a result of encounters with the police and a horrific attack on police who were patrolling what by all accounts was a peaceful protest and lament over these deaths.

Think about this odd connection between these events: in both cases, we have groups of people who, by and large, are good people who want to do their jobs and love their kids and coach little league and... and yet, this morning, our nation has a lot of people who are getting out of bed this morning wondering if they will be judged simply by the uniform or the hoodie that they choose to wear; people who wonder if the color of their skin or the job that they've been hired to do makes them deserving of the death penalty...

Very few of us in this room know how it feels to be profiled while driving in the "wrong" neighborhood or shopping in a strange grocery store... but I am here to tell you that for many of your neighbors and some of your friends, that's a daily, if not hourly occurrence. Very few of us know how it feels like to show up for work wondering if there's someone waiting to kill you simply because of the job to which you've been called, but that is the reality for many of our law enforcement officers.

Can you be, in the words of Paul, "interested in the lives of others" enough to correct your co-worker when he starts spewing racist hate speech? Can you honor the stories of the men and women around you enough to call out your friends on social media when they post and repost bald-faced lies or poison the web with their toxicity? Or do you laugh and say, "Oh, well, that's old Uncle Bert. He doesn't mean half of what he says."

Look for ways to be present in conversations that involve people of color. Listen for their stories, and accept them as opportunities to see the world from a different perspective. Refuse to give credence to, and for God's sake don't be a part of

passing on horrible stereotypes and accusations about what “the police” or “those thugs” or people of color or anyone else is. Refuse to talk about “those people” – whichever category “those people” refers to. And then use whatever influence you have as a result of your race or citizenship or financial status or gender or... or... or... to be you *for someone else today*.

I’m only one person, you say. What difference would it make? I’m not changing anything.

Change you. Be remade in the image of Christ anew each morning, and risk who you are for someone else. Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi did it... and while we’ve not quite gotten there in the story yet, I’m here to tell you that because these three people decided to risk themselves and trust each other and enter the world open-handed, a baby who would become King David was born. And the world was changed eternally by that.

Remember: you’re not making this up. You’re following in the footsteps of those who have brought us to this point, by the grace of God. Amen.