

A Whole New World (Ruth#5)
July 17, 2016
Ruth 4; Ephesians 2:14-17
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

Did you hear the debate? It was quite a while ago, but – WOW – was it powerful! I wanna tell you, it was a real scorcher.



¹The fellow on the right – the old guy with the white beard – he made a strong case for what we might call “traditional values”: you know, a return to the things that made the country great back in the day. He was particularly tough on immigration and what we might call “multiculturalism”, and he was campaigning on a platform that proposed legislation that would not only prohibit marriage to foreign-born people, but would declare any such marriages to be invalid and would immediately deport the foreign wives and any children from such marriages.

It’s all there in the Old Testament book of Ezra, chapter 10. Ezra, and his buddy, Nehemiah, said that the anger of God had descended on the nation because so many foreigners had come and led people away from the truth. The legislation that they proposed won in a landslide – there were only four people who went on record as opposing their action. And so they built a wall and sent the immigrants packing.



²But then the woman started speaking. It was hard to understand her because of her accent, but she talked about the idea that there is no single perspective that can capture the entirety of God’s majesty. She didn’t say this in so many words, but she sort of implied that if anyone thought that he or she had God fully

¹ *Ezra Reading the Law in the Hearing of the People*, Gustave Doré (1832-1883)

² *Ruth Revenant des Champs*, Alexandre Cabanel (1868)

figured out and understood God completely, then that person had to be wrong because God is so much more than any human mind can comprehend.

She went on to say that we are better off when we walk together toward the truth, and that when we are vulnerable to each other and those around us in love and humility we are more likely to be able to hear the ways in which God might direct our steps. One man, hearing what she had to say, summarized it this way:

[God's activity in the world is amplified as people go] beyond the limits placed upon them by society. The social definitions of ethnicity and gender are not only unhelpful but they block the successful solution of life's problems. Inclusion and the violation of role limits become the proper ways of living out one's faith in the midst of a pluralistic world.³

To be honest, the woman didn't speak nearly as much as the man did in the debate, but she sure showed her intentions and her heart in the ways that she acted. She demonstrated her heart for God and for God's people in the way that she lived.



⁴This was not, of course, a “real” debate – at least, not one that we saw in person. On the right, as I've mentioned, we have the historical figures of Ezra and Nehemiah, two of Israel's leaders who brought the nation back from a punishing time of exile in Babylon. Ezra and Nehemiah understood, rightly, that much of what had led people into the place of exile and separation from God was the pagan practices that they had learned from their neighbors as they gave up on following God and instead followed the selfish desires of their own hearts. They

³ Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow, A Social and Historical Approach*, Fortress Press, 1995, pp 223-225.

⁴ *Ruth and Naomi*, He Qi (2001)

reasoned that much of what had led God's people to engage in such pagan practices was their willingness to enter into marriage with non-believing, foreign-born spouses, and so the solution that they proposed was simple: ban foreigners, end mixed marriage, and thus stay pure as God's holy people in God's holy land. As I mentioned, you can read a lot more about where these folks are coming from in the books that bear their names.

The author of the Book of Ruth gently counters this logic by reminding people that if it weren't for foreign women, Israel would not have the greatest leader it ever knew, King David. This man who captured Israel's heart and who led the nation into new places of obedience and success was at least 1/8 Moabite. In David's story, we find a stunning bit of irony, in fact. A strict interpretation of the law as found in Deuteronomy 23:3 would declare Ruth's marriage to Boaz invalid, and that any descendants of that marriage (up to the 10th generation) were to be excluded from participating in the worship of God. Since King David was Ruth's grandson, that means that he should not have been allowed anywhere near the tabernacle. And take a look at the Psalms – the hymnbook that we've carried around for 3000 years: all of the best songs were written by someone who, according to the strict reading of the Law, wasn't even supposed to be here.

What do we do?

Let's look at Boaz.



⁵Boaz' role in the Book of Ruth is to serve as what is called a "guardian-redeemer". This role is well-defined in Leviticus 25 and other places in the Law. When an Israelite man dies, it falls to his brother to take responsibility for the man's widow and to do everything that he can to ensure the survival of the family, even to

⁵ *Boaz's kinsman renounces his rights over Ruth* William de Brailes (1230-1260)

the point of providing a son who will continue the dead man's legacy. If there is no brother, then the next closest relative is responsible to make sure that the widow is cared for and that the line continues.

In the book of Ruth, we have seen a young woman, poor and humbled and despised for her status as a foreigner, come to Boaz and ask him to fulfill the role of "guardian redeemer" in her situation. Even though Ruth represents a family that has acted against the strict interpretation of the Law, Boaz acts in grace toward Ruth and Naomi and so presents to them, and to us, a picture of the face of Christ. Boaz sees these widows as those who are forced to contemplate a life of poverty, fear, exclusion, and homelessness and who then takes steps to offer himself to them in the hopes of correcting that.

As you might imagine, not everyone can do that. In Naomi and Ruth's case, there was a man who was, legally, more responsible for their care than was Boaz. He could have, and perhaps should have, said "yes" to their plea, but he did not. He passed the torch to Boaz and said, "If you would do this, you'll not only be helping these women, you'll be helping me, too." And, as you saw, Boaz was able to act in the interest of Naomi, Ruth, and the entire community by offering himself.

Many scholars have looked at the way that Boaz embraced the role of "guardian redeemer" and have seen an example of Christ. One writer puts it this way:

Through his actions, Boaz communicates Christ. His person and character illustrate the incredible *hesed* (compassionate loving-kindness) that Christ possesses for his people, as well as the great measures he is willing to take to redeem his bride. Though Ruth arrives at Boaz's bed empty-handed and humbled to the core, Boaz treats her with respect and kindness (3:10-13). Disgraced by her position and despised for her ethnicity, the young Moabite

woman appears to have little to offer. Yet, despite all this, Boaz views her as a worthy woman (3:11). Though Ruth comes from a family that has turned their backs on the Lord, the Lord turns his face towards Ruth and reveals himself to her through Boaz. Boaz foreshadows Jesus Christ, the ultimate kinsman redeemer who will redeem a bride for himself—the church.⁶

Jesus, like Boaz, took on a problem that was not his so that we could have a chance to become what we were created to be.

In this way, I'd suggest that Boaz and Jesus ended any debate between Ezra and Ruth. Each of them acknowledges the truth that when we leave God's intentions, we can die; when we seek out less than God's best, we are diminished. It is possible, but surely not wise, for us to pollute ourselves and our world by embracing things that are counter to God's purposes. Yet as they call us to remember this truth, they also remind us that it is God, not us, who gets to define those purposes. It is God, not us, who sets the boundaries for the world.

The solution for Ruth and Naomi and Boaz was not to build higher walls, to spark more violent protests, or to shout louder than their adversaries. That was clearly not the solution for Jesus, either. And that makes me wonder why I would imagine that it's a solution that would work well in my own life.

It would seem to me as though this story of Ruth invites me to look across at someone whom I might identify as being "other" and do my best to discern in what ways I am called to walk – with that "other" – into the intentions of the One who created us both.

I think that there is a word here for the protester and for the policeman... for the light-skinned and the dark-skinned... for the one who trumpets adherence to "family values" (however that one

⁶ *Stephanie Van Eyk, "The Ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer" in Ligonier Ministries blog:* <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/ultimate-kinsman-redeemer/>

chooses to define that term) and to the one who wears all the colors of the LGBTQ rainbow... to the one who just got off the boat and to the one whose great-great-great grandfather was born here... To the born-again, sanctified Christian and to the Muslim as well as the Jew and the atheist... It seems to me that the key is not to push against each other and yell and scream more loudly, or, worse, to blow up more of theirs before they have the chance to blow up yours... but rather to walk in the steps that God has laid out for you in the hopes and in the *expectation* that God knows God's heart, God's purposes, and God's intentions and that if we are able to submit to those things we will discover how to live more Christ-like lives ourselves.

Can we embrace the concept of redemption? Can we acknowledge that things are a red-hot mess in the world right now, but that the best hope through this mess lies not in violence and the extermination of the "other", but in the transformation of each of us? Author Anne Lamott posted something incredibly true on Facebook Friday morning:

There is no healing in pretending this bizarre violent stuff is not going on, and that there is some cute bumper sticker silver lining. (It is fine if you believe this, but for the love of God, PLEASE keep it to yourself. it will just tense us all up.) What is true is that the world has always been this way, people have always been this way, grace always bats last, it just does--and finally, when all is said and done, and the dust settles, which it does, Love is sovereign here.⁷

I know that this sounds incredibly idealistic. I know that you may think me to be naïve; and yet it is apparent to me that the way of Boaz and Ruth and the way of the cross requires me to choose to act first out of love and humility and inclusion rather than in hostility or revenge. I confess that my heart is not pure,

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/AnneLamott/posts/894203970709247>

and that one way for me to make it purer is to learn to sing some of the songs that were written by the descendant of a Moabite woman. I want to offer the strength of my arms and my back and my legs, not to wreak havoc or inflict judgment or mete out revenge, but to protect the weak and restore the broken and search out the lost. And I've come here, to this congregation and to the Church of Jesus Christ in the world, to meet with those who, like me, are called to walk in the way of the cross. May we remind each other, and the world around us, that grace does bat last. That the game isn't over. And that love always, always, always wins. Thanks be to God for the One who sought to reach out to us when we were so far away. Amen.