

September 2, 2018

From Full to Empty to Full

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Ruth 4

[The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth]

⁴ No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, "Come over, friend; sit down here." And he went over and sat down. ² Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here"; so they sat down. ³ He then said to the next-of-kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. ⁴ So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So he said, "I will redeem it." ⁵ Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance." ⁶ At this, the next-of-kin said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

⁷ Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸ So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal. ⁹ Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰ I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses." ¹¹ Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; ¹² and, through the children that the LORD will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

[The Genealogy of David]

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been

born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

¹⁸Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²²Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

Four days after my first baby was born, I called the doctor's office and asked, “How do I know if my milk has come in?” Claire, the nurse, said, “Sweetheart, if you don't know – it's not in.” Let me just say: on day five, I did not recognize myself.

Anyone who has ever nursed a baby, farmed the soil, or simply lived paycheck to paycheck, knows the ticking anxiety of forever cycling from empty to full to empty to full again. For new mamas, it takes hours to go from empty to full and minutes back to empty. For workers, days or weeks to earn what is gone before bills are paid and the fridge refilled. And for the truly marginalized people who can only dream of paycheck to paycheck – widows, fatherless and foreigners, the Bible calls them – “full” is a word their mouths may have never even tasted.

The book of Ruth is the story of Naomi. Naomi is a critical tributary to the story of the people of God – from Israel, to Jesus, to all of us here and now. A story that flows incessantly from fullness to emptiness and back to fullness again. In Naomi – and Boaz – the story is driven, as the Bible always is, by their audacity to resist the places assigned them by their time and place, as they act out the crazy, risky faith that the people God ends up praising have been acting out since the beginning – whether pious, religious people, approved or not.

Farmers hoped for seven plentiful harvests out of ten, according to one commentary I skimmed. In seven good years they could save enough to survive the other three, so long as no two bad years happened back to back. Two years of drought equaled famine. Not a few farmers would have gone under – thus, the *right to redeem* law – and poor people starved to death outright.

At the end of chapter two, we know Ruth has worked through both the barley and wheat harvests in a time of plenty. She and Naomi will eat for a year at least – a little longer if they are frugal. No small accomplishment given where they started. But not where Naomi had hoped to be, all these weeks after Ruth had found this particular job. It seems only Boaz has no idea what Naomi's been up to all along.

Greater measures must be taken. Her instructions to Ruth are meticulous, the same as for a bride on her wedding night. (Remember what you know about Rachel's and Jacob's wedding night – Jacob was surprised.) Once he puts it all together, Boaz is astounded. “It might have been awhile,” as Lisa said in Bible Study on Thursday, and I nearly fell off my chair. He cannot believe she'd choose him over a young man, rich or poor.

It may have been awhile. But he's thought about it all the same. Enough to go find out there's a nearer kinsman than him with the right to redeem. Naomi would have known so too. And no

doubt would have known the other one wasn't as good a prospect as old Boaz. Much pillow talk ensues. Ruth makes a very generous offer.

This phrase “*spread therefore thy skirt over thy handmaid*” is one of the many double-meaning Hebrew words in the story that Boaz himself has already used in chapter two. When he meets Ruth for the first time in his barley field, he blesses her, saying, “*a full reward be given thee by the God of Israel, **under whose wings** thou art come to take refuge.*”

“Spread thy skirt.” “Under whose wings.” Again, friends, this is quite a story. Maybe his feet really were his feet, but the word used here for *feet* is singular, a word used only one other time in the Bible – in poetry, in describing what body parts an angel’s robe covered.

And if Ruth was going over just to talk, why does Naomi have her prepping like a bride and waiting until Boaz has turned out the lights?

The Bible is bawdy. In its time and place, the moral point to be made wasn’t chastity. I have the sense that the hilarity of the story is how slow Boaz is to see what joy has been offered him and the honor with which he receives it. And so the story gets more hilarious. In the outdoor light of day, sober old Boaz couldn’t see what Naomi was trying to say. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.

Anyway, Ruth gets into bed with Boaz, making a very generous offer simply by her presence. And Boaz, having thanked God for this blessing, promises her the moon and all its stars, ending his speech with “*now, just lie down until the morning.*” Aye, yai, yai, yai! – Prince Charming and his promises! My husband says I don't like men. I wish he was altogether wrong. There are so many men I don't like. I love them with the love of the Lord, of course.

There’s lots of story here that I’m not brave enough to tell, Friends. The fact is this: Boaz can promise Ruth whatever he wants, but he's beholden to her for nothing, save in the eyes of God. Not in the next minute. Not when the sun comes up. He pays her, for heaven's sake! Which may not be creepy, but most certainly is if he isn't a good guy. When chapter three ends, he can walk away like it never happened. If she breathes a word against him, he can ruin her with a single word. She could not be more powerless.

Naomi has put her in a precarious position, to say the least. Already a widow and a foreigner, she may now also be pregnant. Naomi appears willing to sacrifice Ruth – her fidelity – for this crazy scheme of hers. She has enough not to starve – for now anyway. Is it greedy for her to want more? For her to want to be NOT THIS POOR?

Chapter three begins with the sentence “*I need to seek some security for you.*” The fact is, there was NO security for a foreign widow in that time and place. Without a plan, Ruth is a dead woman walking. What we know from the last verse of the book of Judges: Israel is a dead country walking. Neither Ruth nor Naomi has any legal, social, economic or legal recourse

besides this *right to redeem* law – and they have their wits. At least, Naomi does. Naomi, the Israelite, acts in her own best interest here – from outside the system that claims to know what is best for Israel.

So these are the last three scenes of the book: a bedroom, a courtroom, and a birthing room. Two are the jurisdiction of women. One, of men. At the gate (in “the courtroom”), the fate of women is to be decided – and they are not allowed to be there. They can only do what they have the courage to do in the spaces where they can move.

No less than Boaz at the gate, Naomi maximizes what power she possesses. Hard as it is to say, her hope is to sell Ruth to Boaz. She's hardly the first or the last. People make choices every day that we cannot imagine having to face: which of their kids to feed? Do you feed different ones on different days so they all starve slowly or feed some enough and let the other starve? People really are this poor. People really are this desperate. And people like Boaz – people with so much power and influence – make decisions every day that have life and death consequences for people like Naomi and Ruth, in the places and in the spaces where those poor people, those desperate people, are never present.

So Boaz goes to the gate – no doubt with a bounce in his step that morning! He finds the near kinsman and gathers ten men – “elders,” the Bible calls them. They make a synagogue – ten Jewish men – enough to make decisions for the community. They will decide Ruth's fate. Boaz will lead them. He offers Elimilech's property to the one with first right to redeem. *I will redeem it*, he says. Everyone does as Boaz wants (once Naomi has let Boaz know what he wants, of course). Except Boaz has stacked the deck, if you will. *“Oh, one more thing: it's a package deal. You take the property, you get a Moabite wife too.”*

“No deal,” says the near kinsmen. *“I take her home and my family will cut me off. You take her.”* Easy enough to judge him; but those were the times. Are you as brave as you wish you were?

Of course, this is exactly what Boaz meant to happen. Nobody expected him to want Ruth. But when HE bought her, what could they do? He's Boaz. Nobody will stand up to him. Whatever hesitation still grips their hearts, they TALK the talk we've watched Boaz talk since chapter one: the language of the Bible about welcoming the stranger. *“May she come into your house and build the house of Israel just like Rachel and like Leah,”* they say.

And sober old Boaz, isn't he something! All we could hope for and more. A promise-keeper, first of all. And not quite but almost as tricky as Naomi. He tricks that entire courtroom into doing exactly what he wanted them to do – technically, what Naomi wanted him to want them to do. But neither Naomi nor Boaz could've done without the other for this story to turn out as it does.

Boaz and Ruth marry. His words to her are the ones we ought to use at weddings! The birthing room is full of women, who say that Naomi has a son from a daughter-in-law who is more to her than seven sons.

And then, as the story goes, “*And Naomi took the boy and laid him to her breast and nursed him.*” The same Bible readers who insist that Ruth and Boaz talked all night, read “*nanny*” here or “*godmother.*” It's the word for wet-nurse. For breastfeeding. It must, for the poetry to work. This little boy, Baby Obed, *he is the one who brought her back to fullness.* As her friends say, “*He shall be unto thee a restorer of life, and a nourisher of thine old age.*”

By his ever-empty little belly and his always-hungry little mouth, Naomi – who was once full then empty – is made full once again. Just like Israel shall be full. Just like all of us who choose to draw life from the Source of all that lives, The One whom back in chapter one Naomi called El-Shaddai, the Almighty. Or, as it might also be translated, “The Breasted One.”

Would you pray with me?