

“A Midnight Proposal”

Ruth 3:1-9

November 9, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

The heart of our passage today is Ruth’s proposal of marriage to Boaz. She uses very different language than we are accustomed to on such occasions. Instead of asking, “Will you marry me?” she tells Boaz to spread his wings over her. Not only is the language different, but the fact that the woman proposes the marriage is also different. There have been hints of marriage throughout the book. When Naomi was attempting to persuade Ruth and Orpah to return to Moab, she made her case based on the fact that their best hope of a future marriage would occur in Moab rather than through following her back to Bethlehem. And when Boaz shows such kindness to Ruth in chapter 2, we as readers can’t help but wonder if there might be the possibility of a future marriage between these two.

There are certainly many cultural differences between Ruth’s day and our own, but one thing that is the same is the act of entering into marriage. Men and women still move toward marriage. Some do it badly, with painful and costly results, while others do it well. I am aware that we have very different marital statuses represented here today. Some of you will face this process of choosing a marriage partner in the future. The majority of us have made that choice already, and most of us in this category will probably not have to make that decision again. Some of us are called by God to the single life and will also not make that decision. This passage has a great deal to say not only about a marriage decision, but about the whole topic of guidance. So let’s consider three sides of this marriage decision, and notice what it teaches us about the whole area of guidance as it relates to any decision.

I. The Theological Side of Ruth’s Proposal

The hand of God was very much in this event, but in order to see his hand at work we will need to evaluate Naomi’s plan. Let’s first try to understand these events. Naomi wanted to do something to provide rest for Ruth, which is her way of saying she wanted to find a husband for her. Boaz was, in her mind, the ideal candidate. He was a wealthy and generous man, and he had already taken an interest in Ruth and Naomi. What’s more, he was a *goel*, a kinsman-redeemer. A *goel* was a man who was given the role of helping fellow clan members who had fallen into hardship, particularly economic hardship. Ruth and Naomi were definitely such a hardship case, and Boaz could meet their need by marrying Ruth and, hopefully, having a son through her who could grow up to support his aging grandmother and mother. But Boaz seemed to

Naomi to need a little nudge. He and Ruth had been around one another most every day during the harvest season. The barley harvest had given way to the wheat harvest, with both harvests lasting about six to eight weeks. But Boaz had made no move toward Ruth beyond his continued generosity toward her.

Naomi had been working out a plan to move things forward. We're told that it was winnowing season. Grains like wheat and barley had to be threshed and winnowed before they could be eaten or ground at the mill. Threshing was accomplished by driving a threshing sledge over the grain, cutting the stalks away from the grain. Winnowing was the process of taking the resulting jumble of stalks and grain, throwing it into the air and letting the wind blow away the lighter stalks while the heavier grain would fall back to the ground. Winnowing was a festive time because it was the first time the farmer would have assurance that his crops would be okay. Prior to this, any number of disasters could destroy one's crops. So Naomi reasoned that Boaz would be in a happy mood following the successful completion of the harvest with all its hard work. So she tells Ruth to wash and perfume herself, put on her cloak and secretly go to the threshing floor where Boaz was working to winnow his grain. Naomi knows that after the work was done, he would eat and drink and probably quickly fall asleep. Ruth was instructed to notice where he went to sleep and, under cover of darkness, go and raise his blanket and uncover his feet and lie down there at his feet. When he would awaken, Ruth was simply to wait on him to tell her what to do.

How should we evaluate Naomi's directions? Some commentators want us to believe that this was a culturally acceptable manner of securing a husband. I'm not so sure. How many of you mothers would advise your daughters to pick out a man they wanted to marry, perfume themselves and put on their most attractive dress, wait for him to fall asleep and then get in bed with him? Then when he wakes up, just see what happens. I don't know of any culture where that would be a good idea. The author drops some hints to incline us to make a similar judgment. The biggest one is the fact that Ruth is urged to maintain such secrecy about this. She's told not to let Boaz see her, and the whole affair takes place in the dark. Parents of young children know that it is when their children get quiet that trouble can be brewing.

I believe that what is happening here is that Naomi is reverting to some of her sinful patterns of the past. God has brought about a great work of repentance in her life. She sinned when she emigrated from Israel ten years prior to this when a famine arose in the land. Her actions revealed a lack of trust in God and a taking of matters into her own hands. But she did repent and return to Israel. Though she is depressed at first, she is starting to come out of that. By the first verse of this third chapter, she is thinking for the first time about someone other than herself. She wants Ruth to be provided for through a husband and children. She has the right goal, but she goes about

securing that goal in the wrong way. But here's the theological side of this. In spite of Naomi going about this in the wrong way, the way of self-trust, God's providence is not spoiled as a result. God's purpose of bringing good into the lives of both Ruth and Naomi is not threatened by Naomi's foolish unbelief. God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick.

There's a comforting truth in all this. Whether it is a decision about marriage or some other important matter in life, we don't have to get everything right in order to gain God's blessing in the decision. If you look back on the decision to marry the person to whom you are currently married and see some immaturity and unbelief in that decision, that doesn't mean that you have missed God's Plan A for your life. We've seen the theme of *hesed* love throughout this book, and the greatest example of that kind of love is God's love. Someone wrote me a note this week saying that they were taught to understand God's *hesed* by remembering the nose of a loyal hunting dog. Such a dog relentlessly pursues his prey until his nose bleeds from such constant sniffing of the ground. Because of God's *hesed*, not even Naomi's anxious and controlling efforts could turn away God's good purposes for Ruth and Naomi.

II. The Romantic Side of Ruth's Proposal

The prevalent marriage narrative of our culture is almost exclusively a romantic and sexual narrative. Our culture pushes us to make this decision about marriage almost exclusively in terms of "falling in love," sexual attraction, or a combination of the two. The Bible both affirms and warns us about this. It affirms this by embracing marriage and sexuality as good gifts from God, but warns us against reducing marriage only to the romantic and sexual side. We are going to see how this passage affirms the romantic side of marriage in this point, and consider the warning against it in the next point.

Did you notice how verse 8 uses the general words "man" and "woman" instead of Boaz and Ruth? **"At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet!"** Commentators have seen in this an intentional parallel to the account of the first marriage between Adam and Eve. That is reinforced by the fact that the man is asleep, just as Adam was put to sleep by God when he made Eve. And just as Adam awoke to find his wife there before him, presented by God as a supremely good gift, so Boaz awoke to find his future wife there before him. God's grace restores what his love originally created marriage to be. There is a romance to marriage, a sense of unexplored future goodness.

We also see an embrace of the sexual side of marriage. The passage is filled with imagery and language that has double meanings in Hebrew. *Feet* is a euphemism in Hebrew for the male sexual organ. There are three different

images here that are used in the Bible for sexual relations: knowing, lying down and uncovering. And the threshing floor is a place where forbidden sex might happen. Ruth takes steps to make herself as attractive as possible. While we need to remember that the Bible warns us about giving too much importance to outward beauty, it also needs to be remembered that the Bible doesn't call Christians to a life of dowdiness. Jonathan Edwards' wife was often criticized by members of their congregation for how well-dressed she was, a criticism Edwards himself apparently didn't agree with.

The affirmation of marriage we see in this text is another reminder of God's ability to restore this fallen world to what he intended for it all along. That's what he's been doing throughout the book of Ruth. He not only restores this Israelite woman who has struggled to believe that God can be trusted, but he also restores a Gentile woman, Ruth, turning her from her destructive idolatry to the worship of the true and living God. An application of this is not to despise God's good gift of marriage, even when the marriage is still marked by a great deal of brokenness. God knows how to restore broken things.

III. The Non-Romantic Side of Ruth's Proposal

The warning present in this romantic narrative is to make sure we don't reduce marriage only to romance and sexuality. Naomi's foolish plan could have been disastrous. What saved the day was the integrity and clear thinking of both Ruth and Boaz. Consider first the thinking going on in this move toward marriage. As we're going to see in the next section, Boaz accepts her proposal, but in thinking through the matter recognizes the existence of another kinsman-redeemer with a closer relation to Naomi. He must first give to that man the opportunity to redeem Naomi through marriage to Ruth. So marriage is not just about romantic feelings and sexual attraction. It's about character and thinking. Paul Miller says it like this.

The magic of sexual attraction in the book of Ruth is set in a framework of wisdom and purity. In contrast, the Disney paradigm of "falling in love" is invested with almost supernatural powers. No need for thinking or having a real relationship. So in *Cinderella*, the prince and Cinderella talk for only about ten seconds prior to their marriage. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the prince talks with Princess Aurora for about thirty seconds. Not a lot of thinking going on! (*A Loving Life*, p. 122)

We also see the integrity and character of Boaz. He awakened to find a young woman in bed with him in the middle of the night. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to take advantage of her. Ruth would have been in a very weak position to accuse him of wrong. What, after all, was she doing at that location in the middle of the night? What's more, she was on the bottom of the Bethlehem social scale, and Boaz was at the top. If Boaz took advantage

of her, who would believe her account of things over that of Boaz? Boaz could easily have gotten away with whatever he wanted to do here. Maybe Naomi was counting on his integrity all along. If so, she was not disappointed.

The striking thing to me here about Boaz's integrity is that he had no time to prepare for this moment. His character and integrity shines more brightly because of the quick and unexpected way this came up. It's the difference between a pop quiz on one hand and on the other hand an exam where you are given the questions beforehand and plenty of time to prepare. Had Boaz not passed this pop quiz, much damage would have been done, both to him and clearly to Ruth and Naomi. I doubt there would have been a future marriage had he taken advantage of her here. If he had been willing to use her for his own pleasure in this instance, he would probably not have reversed course later. And we know from the next chapter that the other potential kinsman-redeemer was unwilling to redeem Naomi, so Ruth and Naomi would both have been left in poverty. There was more at stake here than at first seems evident. It was the integrity of Boaz that saved the day. Similarly, our Boaz, Jesus, has saved the day by his integrity. He refused to hear the temptation from Peter's mouth that he avoid the cross, though it came from his dear friend.

Ruth also responded with integrity, seen when she departs from Naomi's instructions to her. Naomi had instructed Ruth to be silent when Boaz would awaken to find her at his feet, and wait for him to tell you what to do. But Ruth doesn't do that. Instead, she proposes marriage. But notice the words she uses to persuade Boaz to agree to her proposal: **"for you are a redeemer"** (v. 9). That's the word *goel* we have seen before. Boaz is Naomi's kinsman-redeemer. Ruth is exhibiting once again her *hesed* love, looking out for Naomi's interests in all this. She is saying to Boaz that he should marry her for Naomi's sake. Boaz recognizes this and in the next verse blesses Ruth for her kindness. He says to her, **"You have made this last kindness greater than the first"** (v. 10). "Kindness" is our word *hesed*.

CONCLUSION:

It is easy to make this area of guidance more complicated than it needs to be. As God guides Ruth and Boaz toward marriage, two truths rise to the surface. First, God knows how to lead his people. He is not easily thwarted, even by the foolish scheming of Naomi. So we can trust God and accept what he brings into our lives. As for us, our responsibility, beyond trusting God, is to be guided by God's word as we obey it. If you want to know what you should do, I cannot think of anything better than to do what the old hymn says when it commends to us the path of trusting and obeying.