

People are friends not food

Ruth 3

One of the most hurtful things to experience is when you know you're being used;
when you know that someone is trying to take advantage of you.

There is a scale of situations where you might be taken advantage of:
At one end: the Nigerian scammer who clogs up your inbox,
or the salesman who tried to push you with the hard sell
These attempts at using you are more irritating than hurtful.

But at the other end of the scale you can get very serious cases of abuse:
both psychological and physical,
often both types coming together.

As I reflect on my own life I can see that on the whole I have been treated fairly well.
There was perhaps one friendship
which skated right alongside the definition of abuse.
This happened at Theological College of all places.

I struck up a friendship with a fellow student who saw in me a way of getting ahead.
I found myself handing over my research notes for him to write up his own
essays. He would pound on my door to help him through exams. His
preparation was lacking not because of any inability on his part but because
of the choices he made during the term time. When I protested he would
infer that the problem was with my lack of charity and friendship.
I felt used, angry and upset.

It's an all too common scenario, isn't it?
One person taking advantage of the other;
It happens in families it happens in *corporations*
It happens all too often.

In Ruth Ch 3 we see three people who choose a different path.
To varying degrees, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz decide against what we might call
a predatory approach to relationships.
Instead of seeing what advantage they could get from each other,
we see three people of God seeking the good of one another.

And I think this chapter leaves us with a few questions about our own relationships.
Three questions in fact: one raised by Naomi, one by Ruth and one from Boaz

So what question do Naomi's actions raise for us?

Let's have a look again at the first couple of verses...

One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you,
where you will be well provided for. ² Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a

relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor.

The events of ch 3 probably happen a few weeks after Ruth first met Boaz;
It's still within the harvest season
but the workers have moved from field to threshing floor.
And in that time it would have become very clear,
in fact it was clear from their first meeting
that Boaz was a kind and generous man,
so Naomi is thinking "*He's the one for Ruth*".
"*If I can get them together then Ruth is going to be looked after.*"

But as Naomi starts to explain her plan to Ruth
we notice a subtle detail that's actually very important,
it's a detail which emphasizes just how *selfless* Naomi is.

Back in chapter 2.20, Naomi refers to Boaz as a
close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.
Naomi is referring to an Israelite law
that allowed a close relative to step in and help those who were in trouble.
If an Israelite had to sell land or maybe even sell themselves into slavery,
then the guardian-redeemer could pay the price to buy back the land
or to buy back their freedom.
Boaz was someone who could do this.

But notice Boaz is described not as the *one and only* guardian-redeemer,
but as one of a number of guardian-redeemers ... notice the plural.
In fact, we learn in ch 3.12 that there was a closer relative who was first in line.
So it's interesting to note that when she's explaining her plan in v2,
Naomi drops the family guardian description;
Boaz is simply described as "a relative of ours".

What's going on here?
It would seem that Naomi's primary interest
was not found in maintaining the family farm.

Naomi seems to be the type of person who knew who was who in the wider family,
she would have known that that there was another family member
who would be in a better position to re-establish the family's property,

But it seems as if she's made the choice to secure Ruth's future ahead of her own.
In terms of finding a husband for Ruth,
the kind and gentle Boaz, who's already demonstrated his generosity,
he seems to be a safer bet
than some other relative who, while he might be able to buy back Naomi's land,
may not be the right kind of husband for Ruth.

So in in her cunning attempt to push Boaz and Ruth together,
rather than aiming straight for the closer guardian-redeemer,
*Naomi reveals that her plan is centered on Ruth and her fortunes
rather than any desire to secure her own family's legacy.*
If Ruth marries Boaz *without* him acting as family redeemer
then there's nothing in it for Naomi.
But Naomi is willing to push this match through nonetheless
if it means Ruth enters into a caring household.

It's an incredible moment of *other person-centeredness* that Naomi demonstrates.
And it's an action which raises our first question:
How willing are you to promote someone else's good ahead of your own?
How willing are we to forgo our own agenda for that of someone else?

I mentioned earlier my anger at my friend who used me when we were studying.
At the other end of the spectrum were those rare individuals
who at the expense of their own study time
would spend hours tutoring those who were genuinely struggling.
I was not one of those people who helped others.
But I think I should have been.
And I wonder whether our own circles,
be they family circles or places of work,
I wonder whether they offer us similar opportunities:
to stop and lend a hand even when it disadvantages us in some way.
In a world where everyone seems to be competing (it seems that way to me)
Naomi's actions show us a different path. *Can we promote others?*

What about Ruth? What question does she raise for us?

Lets read from verse 7

⁷When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet!

It's an amusing scene to imagine:

Boaz the lovable but immensely respectable elder
startled by a young woman propositioning him in the middle of the night.
You can imagine him madly trying to sit up and cover his feet
in an attempt to maintain his dignity.

It's the humour of seeing a duck out of water,
to see a leader of men snookered by a two women with a plan,
a man of gentle gravitas taken out of his depth by a spirited young woman.

But then as Ruth speaks,

we hear the words of a woman who has a respectability all of her own.
We hear that she's a woman of steadfast faithfulness

who hasn't forgotten her promise to never leave Naomi behind.

⁹ "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family."

Again the key to what is happening here is in the language:

While Naomi has forgotten about the issue of the guardian-redeemer,
Ruth presses Boaz to take up the role of family saviour,
even though that mantle actually belongs to someone else.
Ruth reintroduces the idea of Boaz acting as Guardian redeemer
to make sure that Naomi is looked after as well.
While Naomi is willing to sacrifice herself for Ruth,
Ruth is not willing to leave Naomi behind,

And she does this at great risk to herself.

She runs the risk of rejection: Boaz did not have to say yes to this idea.
She runs the risk of embarrassment if word of this encounter gets out;
a late night liaison with Boaz on the threshing room floor.

So here is the question Ruth's actions ask of us.

Are we willing to argue the case for someone else?
Are we willing to ask powerful people to consider the little guy?
Are we willing to ask powerful people to sacrifice something?

At Waitara Public they have an OC class in years 5 and 6;

a class for the academically gifted. At the primary school where I attended they had the opposite, a class for those with intellectual disabilities. Sometimes when our own classroom teacher was away and there was no substitute our class would be split up into other classes for the day, and one day I was sent to spend a day in this special class for special needs children. I still remember it. After lunch the teacher, Mrs Walsh would have a segment which looking back I call *the airing of grievances*. One by one the children would stand up and rehearse how badly they'd been treated during the lunch break, and as you can imagine these children were pretty poorly treated by the other pupils. And then Mrs Walsh would send for the offending child and have them stand before the class and give an account for their behaviour. "Why did you kick Jimmy's ball under the classroom? Why did you toss Sally's hat on the roof?" She was such an advocate for these poor children. I have no idea whether she was a Christian or not, but in a sense it was a very godly thing to do, because we read elsewhere in the Old Testament that our God is one who defends the orphan and the widow, who defends the vulnerable. And we find something of this spirit within Ruth. Do we have that Spirit within ourselves?

Can we petition for others. Ruth leads us to ask that question.

Finally we come to Boaz, what question does he lead us to ask?

¹⁰ “The LORD bless you, my daughter,” he replied. “This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. ¹¹ And now, my daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character.

Verse 10 is a verse which people over-romanticise

We imagine Boaz as a kind old bachelor, who, due to his great humility, doesn’t think he has any chance with the much younger Ruth and so the two women make it easy for him by doing all the flirting.

But I think it makes more sense to read the story quite differently.

If he were a bachelor, it is unlikely that Boaz would have been respected. In the OT to be without a family meant that you were seen as being cursed. It’s more probable that he had at least one wife, possibly more, sons too. Boaz was not in need of kindness;

He was the man who granted kindness to others.

So I think the “greater kindness” that Boaz refers to isn’t a kindness shown to him, but is that Ruth extends to Naomi in bringing her into this new family. Boaz has already noted how impressed he is with Ruth’s commitment to Naomi, and now he’s saying that Ruth is sitting more highly in his esteem. She has approached the man who offers the best chance for both women, she isn’t running after a selfish option, and Boaz is impressed by this.

In a roundabout way they are a good match,
in that they both have the same values: they are both very selfless people.

It goes without saying that he refuses to take physical liberties with Ruth (v14) even though he could have if he wanted to, and even though the invitation was there. His approach is something for us to emulate in a society where easy sex can be found and where powerful men have so readily imposed their desires upon others. The antidote to the horrendous stories about Hollywood powerbrokers that have inundated our news bulletins over recent weeks can be found in the Christ-like men of the Bible like Boaz.

But Boaz does agree to the plan to become the family redeemer, even though he will have to do a bit of work to make it the marriage happen

And as he agrees with Ruth’s plan he also is taking a risk.

Redeeming land involved a significant outlay of money, money siphoned out of your own estate into someone else’s name: in this case the name of Elimelek’s family, Naomi’s dead husband.

And then if Ruth did end up having children,

this would mean a further division of his estate
as another heir entered into the picture.

So there were good reasons why Boaz could have said "*thanks but no thanks*"
But that's not the decision he makes.
Instead he starts down the path of voluntarily paying the price needed
to save Ruth and her mother-in-law.

And so his actions leave us with a third question:
Would you be willing to take on a task you didn't have to take on?
Boaz could have passed things over to the other guy... but instead he says
"No, I'll be the one to show grace".

I think we see modern day Boazes when we look at foster parents,
particularly those that take on difficult cases at their own expense.
Have you seen the movie *Lion*? About the boy from India who got lost on an
overnight train and ended up in an orphanage, and was adopted by an
Australian couple from Hobart? He had an adopted brother who was a very
difficult case, the damage and trauma that had occurred before his brothers
arrival into this family was very significant but he was met with an
extraordinary love from these two parents from Hobart.
Again, I know nothing of any faith that this couple do or don't have,
but there is something biblical about their example.

Are we willing to take on a difficult task even when we don't have to.

So when we take Naomi, Ruth and Boaz together,
we get an interesting little community.
It's a little community of grace.
Each member making decisions for the benefit of other.

It's a community which, of course,
offers us a foretaste of Jesus and his loving actions towards us:

Like Naomi, Jesus' sacrificial death promoted our good ahead of his own.
Like Ruth remembered Naomi, Jesus is the one who intercedes on our behalf
Like Boaz, Jesus is the one who voluntarily took on the task of offering up his life
so that we might be forgiven and so we might have a future.

And as we learnt in our recent series in the Gospels, we have a task to imitate Christ,
and not only to imitate Christ,
but to also imitate this little community of grace that we find in Ruth 3
a community which is asking these questions:
Can we promote others?
Can we go into bat for others?
Can we take on tasks we don't have to? Let's pray.