



Love in Action

Ruth 3

Grace Church | 12.12.21

The book of Ruth is truly a literary masterpiece, perhaps the most complete work of literary art in the Scriptures. It's compact, it's beautiful—rural, charming, homey, romantic, dramatic, hopeful, surprising, unassuming—like all good comedies, it ends in marriage and the expectation of the future. It provides for us compelling heroic pictures, women and men to emulate, honor, revere. Last week Matthew compared it to a Jane Austen novel, and that is fair and apt perhaps—it's like a hot cup of tea in literary form. But what sets the book of Ruth apart from some fanciful work of Christian romantic fiction, what really makes it last as God's inspired Word in a way that other stories do not, is that its vision of love is unlike any other found outside of Christian witness. The picture it paints of love is idyllic, but not glamorous. It's romantic, but not sensual. That's because at the heart of Ruth, like the heart of God's great story in the Bible, is *hesed*, covenant-keeping love. Two weeks ago Luke described *hesed* as "over-the-top faithfulness, undeserved, above and beyond loyalty. But more often than not, as it is translated in our text today, it's *kindness*."

Hesed is over the top, but it's excessive not because of its shows of grandeur, but because of its sacrificial kindness. *Hesed* can be shown in small ways, but when it is shown, it is done so as Jesus tells us "for the least of these." It's been shown to us in Ruth through Ruth's clinging to Naomi in her "least" moment, showing her an unimaginable kindness. And we saw it last week in Boaz' generosity to Ruth, an undeserved kindness to a foreign and needy woman in a strange land, inviting her to his table and providing for her needs. *Hesed* is the thread that ties together this book: this covenant kindness, and not primarily romantic love, is what makes Ruth a love story of love stories. It's in fact what even opens up the possibility of romantic love, since it is demonstrations of *hesed* that draw Ruth and Boaz to notice each other romantically in the first place.

Today in our text, we come to the climax of the story of Ruth. No doubt, it is romantic in some sense, as the characters express a genuine care for one another. But since it is the high moment, it's also the moment where the expressions of *hesed* are heightened to their greatest potential. Ruth 3 is a picture perfect example of what happens when *hesed* is sown into the field of human relationships. It results in, as James 3:18 puts it, a harvest of righteousness.

Why is this significant for you? It matters to you because I know for a fact you are tired of weak, superficial, fleeting expressions of love. I know that you long, man or woman, for expressions of love that go beyond feeling and emotion. You don't walk through those doors every Sunday



because you want a taste of sentimentality. You come because just this week or last week or maybe the week before, there came that moment where the stress and pain of life washed over you, you laid on your back on your bed or stepped away from your phone long enough to think: “Does God really love me?” So you come to church to find out. And let me tell you, you’ve come to a good place to have that question answered.

In our text today we see three definitions of covenant love. If two weeks ago we thought about *when* God shows his love, namely in the darkness and when we least expect it, today we will examine *how* he shows his love. In Ruth 3, *hesed* is shown through 1) Strategic Concern; 2) Faithful Risk-Taking; and 3) Determined Promise Keeping.

Strategic Concern (verses 1-4)

Chapter 3 opens directly with Naomi, but it's a different kind of Naomi than we are used to. Previously, we were introduced to a depressed, hopeless Naomi. She asked everyone to call her “Mara”, meaning “bitter”, because her primary identity was that of grief, a realization that the Lord had taken away everything she loved. All was lost for Naomi. But depressed women do not speak like she does in **verse 1**. Previously, Naomi’s concerns were only for herself. Now, where does her attention turn? Towards Ruth. The kindness of Boaz and the faithfulness of Ruth has warmed Naomi's cold and bitter heart. Remember in 2:20, she speaks of the Lord that “his kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead.” There it is: God’s *hesed* has given her hope. In her hope, she can begin to operate with a concern for others, not just herself.

Notice the goal of Naomi is for *rest* for Ruth. See, Ruth has been working very hard in the field. Naomi knows that, and she knows that living with and providing for your old mother in law is not an ideal situation. Ruth needs a true home, a place of provision and rest from her labor in the fields. The real Naomi now comes out: she is a provider in her own right, not just one who wallows in her pain but a woman of action. Her concern for Ruth is so great, so full of kindness, that she concocts an incredibly shrewd plan.

Boaz, Naomi says, is our relative. It’s perhaps been several weeks since your last meeting, and now the time for winnowing the barley has come, when the Barley is separated from the chaff and harvested. But let’s not forget Boaz just yet. Tonight he will be in a dark and secluded place, sleeping next to his winnowed grain, likely to guard it, but also because after the winnowing he would have just taken part in a great feast to celebrate the success of the harvest. Who has energy to walk home when you can lay down under the stars after some good food and drink? So Naomi tells Ruth to dress up, wash and smell good, because now is the time for action. But don’t do anything until *after* Boaz is full. When he is asleep, go and uncover his feet and lie down with him. Then, leave it up to him.

Now, a lot of fuss is made with interpreters over what to make of Naomi’s plan. Nearly every word in **verse 4** has multiple meanings. We do know that Naomi intends for this plan to lead towards



marriage for Ruth and Boaz. That's why she mentions Boaz as relative, because he is the one able to be a kinsman redeemer, to marry Ruth and carry on the line of Elimelech. But why would Naomi suggest Ruth enter into such a potentially tempting or compromising situation? Who instructs a young woman to sneak up on a compromised and sleeping man and get in bed with him? Surely Naomi knows where this has the potential of leading. Is that her intention, that Ruth would tempt and sleep with Boaz, forcing his hand into marriage? Some seem to believe so, but I think not, here is why.

First, Naomi clearly knows Boaz. She recognizes him in chapter 2, and speaks again of him in chapter 3 as if she is confident in his actions. This man is a close relative, highly spoken of in the city. He is not young—it's why he calls Ruth "daughter" so many times in this book, and why he tells her later that she could have gone after younger, more attractive men. Naomi has a history with Boaz, and she trusts him. She is not selling Ruth into prostitution, but pushing her into the hands of a worthy man of character.

Secondly, she knows Ruth and Boaz' history. Remember how delighted she was to hear of Boaz' kindness to Ruth. She is sensing something, something that perhaps she picks up on as a wiser older woman. Clearly, Boaz has shown deference to Ruth. Ruth is a Moabite—remember that the clan of Moab came from sexual sin, as Lot's daughter slept with him in the cave after getting her Father drunk. And the Moabite women were the ones with which Israel were tempted by in Number 25 as they journeyed in the wilderness, taking them as sexual partners and going after their gods. For Boaz to show care for a Moabite, a classic temptress right, is rare and risky. So Naomi knows Boaz has seen something in her that makes him attracted to her. But as an older man, he is being careful, he is taking his time. He doesn't want to assume that Ruth is into him, when she maybe could convince another younger man to marry her. So Naomi knows: we have to take the fight to him, give old Boaz a little push in the right direction. I don't believe Naomi intends to seduce him, rather her concern is so great for Ruth that she is willing to make it her life's mission to make sure she ends up with Boaz. She knows the details, she's got a hold of Boaz' calendar, she's read the subtle signs, and she has a plan.

How many of us long for a love that takes action, that spends time meticulously planning for our good? The last kind of love we want is a haphazard one—it seems exciting at first, but ultimately it lets us down. No, we need a strategic love. God Almighty loves with *hesed* in this way. He has concern for us. His plans may seem strange, his methods requiring faith, but he is a God of action. What greater expression of this can we think of than the season of advent? We cry out in our need: God, make a home with us! Give us rest! And he says: "I have a plan." It's nothing you would ever think of. It's even more crazy than accosting a man in the middle of the night. The plan is this: I will send my own Son, very God of very God, true light of true light, to become man. I have enough strategic concern for you to place my own Son, my very self, in the line of fire, to take on the dark, dusty, dangerous, and dirty world of humankind. No wonder Philippians 2 is a hymn of exaltation towards this Christ child, who "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." That's a crazy, strategic, concern for the least of these. That's *hesed*.



Faithful Risk-Taking (verses 5-11)

Now of course Naomi is not all-knowing or wise. Her plans are not God's, and although she models God's hesed in her concern, she must know that she is putting Ruth in a particularly dangerous situation. Regardless of her intention, she is introducing a scenario ripe with possibility for sexual sin and moral failure. The Hebrews were not unclear that sexual activity outside of marriage was immoral. They could be cast out, cut off, or even receive death for such an action, depending on the severity. Naomi cannot be 100% sure that Ruth won't be taken advantage of: Boaz is a man, after all, and no one ever knows what really happened that dark night. This plan is risky, seriously risky.

And yet, Ruth doesn't hesitate. **Verse 5**, she is ready. She goes down, she waits for Boaz to eat and drink his fill. **Verse 7** doesn't imply drunkenness, but simply a state of contentment that often comes from a good meal and a few drinks. Boaz is living the good life. But when Ruth hears his snores, she comes to uncover his feet and lie down with him. It's unclear exactly why Ruth is told to uncover the feet of Boaz. We don't really find many clues worth holding onto in the rest of scripture, but it does show a bit of a sexual overtone. To "uncover" in anyway is to present nakedness, which would be a great shame outside of marriage. Think about Adam and Eve in the garden suddenly discovering their nakedness, or Noah's son Canaan receiving a curse for seeing his father's uncovered nakedness. So uncovering any part of the body, even just the feet, was a very intimate and potentially compromising act. But Ruth does it softly the text says, implying her gentle care. She does not intend it sexually, but she takes the risk anyway. In the middle of the night, at midnight, Boaz is startled, presumably by the cold of the air on his uncovered feet. And as he wakes, the first thing he notices is a woman in his bed! He rolls over, opens his eyes, and he is staring in the eyes of Ruth. His reaction of "who are you?" can be taken in several ways, imagine yourself in his scenario! But the question actually lies at the heart of the book. Who is Ruth? Who is this foreign woman, making her way to Bethlehem? She is an enigma, a participant in providence. And here Boaz asks: who *really* are you, Ruth, and what are you doing here?

Notice how Ruth responds. She does so with her name. Up to this point, Boaz has not been told the name of Ruth. In chapter 2 she is described as "the Moabite woman". Ruth could have called herself "the daughter-in-law of Naomi" or "the Moabite" or even just "the one gleaning in your fields", but to give her name is a show of vulnerability, throwing herself and her identity in the hands of Boaz. This too is seen when she says "your servant." In chapter 2 Ruth is described as the servant of Boaz, but although it is translated the same, this word for servant is different. It's actually "maidservant", it's not just a worker in the field but a woman eligible for marriage. By laying down at Boaz's feet and responding in this way, Ruth is going beyond Naomi's plan. Naomi told her to wait for Boaz to respond, but here Ruth is making the proposition. She says: "I am Ruth, a woman eligible to be your wife." But she doesn't stop there.

Ruth's next words serve as the key to unlocking the whole of the chapter. Spread your wings over your servant, she tells Boaz, for you are a redeemer. Here is a play on words. Ruth means two things: first, the word for "wings" is similar to "garment". Boaz literally has a garment he is laying



under, and she is asking Boaz to make room for her in his bed. This image of spreading out the corner of the garment was a typical image for marriage, like we find in Ezekiel 16:8,

“When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine.”

So Ruth is telling Boaz: cover me with your garment, marry me and provide for me rest. But she is also using Boaz’ own words. Remember in chapter 2, Boaz praises Ruth and prays for her, saying: “The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!” Boaz praised Ruth for taking refuge in the wings of God, and now Ruth is telling Boaz: marriage to you is the way that I plan to refuge in God. She is showing an incredible honor to Boaz, saying: “If I am the kind of woman who takes shelter in God, you are the kind of man that God provides to shelter me.” Not only this, but she calls upon Boaz’ place as redeemer. This is why she is making her request. Not for herself, but for her family honor. She calls Boaz’ character to the plate, serving up an opportunity to prove himself.

I want you to see how risky this is, but also how full of faith. Ruth acts on Naomi’s plan, even increases the risk of it by speaking up and essentially proposing to Boaz and telling him what he should do. Not because Boaz is sexy and young, but because Boaz is faithful. She does it for the honor of her family, she does it for Elimelech and for Mahlon, her late husband. She does it for Naomi. But ultimately, she does it for God. With this act of bold and risky faith, Ruth will become a true part of the family of God, an Israelite grafted in through and through. This is her chance: by throwing herself at the feet and mercy of Boaz and his love, she is throwing herself at the mercy of the God of Israel. Can you imagine how her heart raced as she presented her case? How would Boaz respond? What would he make of such a bold and unorthodox action from a foreign woman? Do you not think she had her doubts in that moment, anxieties and fears?

Friends, it’s not always easy to trust. We’ve been hurt many times before. Faith is not natural for our proud and assuming hearts. But true love requires risk, risk that is rooted in faith that God is really who he says he is. In your circumstances today, do you have the faith necessary to share your name with the God of the universe, to approach him boldly and ask him: “spread your wings over me. Protect me, love me, make me your own”?

If you struggle with that kind of faith, let me share good news. Jesus Christ the righteous is full of faithfulness. He trusted his Father to the very end. He sweat blood in the garden, carrying our anxieties and our fears, but he did not give in. Boldly he approached his death, boldly he spread his own wings wide to be nailed down, and boldly he accepted the greatest risk imaginable, dying in the place of sinners. But his faithfulness is so great that to him, although he bore the weight of it, it wasn’t risk at all. He knew, he trusted in the Triune plan, and he threw himself wholly unto death. He did it, so that when your faith is weak and you cannot help but seem to stumble towards the plan of God, he can give you his own boldness. The faith of Jesus is God’s gift to you. On the cross



Jesus cried out to the Father: “into your hands I commit my Spirit”, so that now we can approach the throne of grace in our time of need and commit our own selves to God and God alone.

Friend, you can trust God. He won't let you down. Here's a picture in **verses 10-11**. Boaz commends Ruth for her *kindness*, her *hesed*. Why? Because he knows that she could have gone after younger men, either poor men for a marriage full of passion or rich men for a marriage full of promise. But her kindness is shown in that she longs not just for a passionate fling or a full bank account, but for a redeemer. So Boaz tells her: do not fear. Put your anxieties to rest. I have seen your *hesed*, all the town talks about your worth, just as all around the city gates they speak of the Proverbs 31 woman. You are a worthy woman, and I know you are not trying to seduce me. I will be your redeemer and your husband.

What a grace, what response to Ruth's bold and risky faith. Church, this is how your heavenly Father responds when you throw yourself on him by faith. When you really trust him, when you come to him with your need, he sees it. And he says: “you are full of worth in Christ. Do not fear. I will do for you what you ask. I will be your redeemer.”

Determined Promise Keeping (verses 12-18)

This brings us to the last piece of covenant love. It's shown to us through Boaz, and it's a determined promise-keeping. See, Boaz makes a promise to Ruth. He says, I will do for you all that you ask, I will redeem you, and there is nothing to fear. But there is a slight problem. **Verse 12-13** we are told that there is another redeemer possible, and he has a claim to Ruth if he would like to take it. I'm sure this is a bit unsettling to Ruth—here she is, throwing herself at an honorable man, and then there is perhaps a less honorable man, a stranger, who she may have to marry instead? But Boaz remains steadfast. He is a man of the law, a just man, so he knows he must concede if he will redeem Ruth. But He promises that if this man will not, look in **verse 13**, “as the Lord lives”, he will redeem you. Then he bids Ruth rest.

Boaz is determined to keep his promise. Next week we will see he is not going to let some unnamed, unwilling redeemer take Ruth from him. But for now, his word is enough. He makes his promise in the light of the Lord, because that is *hesed*. He is a man who lives “*coram deo*”, before the face of God. He owes Naomi nothing, but generously he promises her future lies in his hands. He assures Ruth—you have been looking for a place to lie down and rest, and here is the palace you can do it. Sleep now, because you can rest in my promises.

All of this determination is confirmed as *hesed* by Boaz' actions in the morning. He protects Ruth's reputation, dealing gently with her by not allowing anyone to see her leave and assume foul play. But he also gives barley, six portions. It's unclear what these portions are, but we know it's a lot, likely over 60 pounds of food. Ruth is not a weak woman, but carries it all on her back. Why does Boaz give all this to Ruth? Pay attention here. Ruth comes back to Naomi and she asks how things went, but literally she asks: “who are you, daughter?” It's not that she fails to recognize Ruth, but



she asks the same question Boaz does. Who are you? Are you the woman coming back with good news, or poor? And Ruth answers in a peculiar way. Instead of getting all the details related to us about Boaz' response to Ruth, the author details for us Boaz' words previously unknown in **verse 17**: "you shall not go back empty handed."

Why focus on the barley, instead of the acceptance of the marriage proposal? Well, it's because the marriage proposal is not complete. There is still the matter of the unknown redeemer in front of Boaz to take care of. Boaz cannot marry Ruth yet, but he wants her and Naomi to feel the weight of his promise to take care of them. When he says: "I will get it done", he wants them to know without any doubt that he will. So as a down payment for their redemption, he sends an extravagant amount of barley. That word "empty handed" we have seen once before, in chapter 1, where Naomi said: "I left full and came back empty handed." But Naomi is no longer empty handed—she is full. Naomi gets the picture: she understands Boaz' *hesed*, she knows that this barley signifies his promise is as good as gold, they are as good as redeemed. We see this by her response to Ruth in **verse 18**. What confidence Naomi has: it won't be long Ruth, she says. Clearly Boaz is a godly man, for when he promises rest, he cannot rest until his promise is fulfilled.

This is true love: determined promise keeping. True love does not rest until its promises are fulfilled. Church, God is a god of true love. He has made promises to you—he has promised that forever if you are in Christ he will be your god and you will be his people. He has promised to redeem you. When he makes a promise, you can take it to the bank. 2000 some odd years ago, God sealed up his promise with a guarantee, a down payment. Jesus Christ went to the cross to defeat sin and bring you to God, rose from the grave to make sure death never came back, and sent his own Holy Spirit to guard you until the day he comes again. Nothing can snatch you from the Father's hand, and nothing can thwart his promises. He will not rest until you enter into his rest.

Notice Ruth and Naomi received just six measures. Plenty, but seven is the number of completion, not six. While one need of Naomi had been met, namely her need for food in the midst of famine, she still was childless. And Ruth was barren. But the seed of barley carried with it a promise too: more is coming. The seventh portion is on its way, not the seed of barley, but the seed of the woman. Covenant marriage opens the door for covenant fruit, for a covenant heir.

Does God love you? Yes, God has shown it in Christ and has given us the downpayment of his love in the Spirit. And he will provide everything we need by the Spirit, even more than we need, six helpings of spiritual grain. But there is more coming. The son is coming back, the seed of the woman to finally crush the head of the serpent. So what is left for you is to wait. But it's not long. The matter will be settled before the day is up. Jesus is coming back soon, church. If you long for love, there it will be actualized in full. And so this Advent, Christ has come. We celebrate his provision as a guarantee that his promises will come to pass. But we also say, with all the saints: come quickly, Lord.

