



From the Pulpit: June 18, 2023

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time—Father's Day

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Ruth 3

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, IV: Seduction

The scripture lesson this morning is from Ruth 3:

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working.

See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." She said to her, "All that you say I will do."

So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk and was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; ... Remain this night, and in the morning, ...

So she lay at his feet until morning but got up before one person could recognize another, for he said, "It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." Then he said, "Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her back; then he went into the town.

A school board in Utah has decided that the Bible is indecent and therefore inappropriate reading material for children, so the Bible is banned from elementary and middle-school libraries in that Utah district.¹

"She's [Naomi] like Fidelity or Charles Schwab: "Think about your future, honey! Let's plan ahead."

The third chapter of Ruth is one passage that concerned parents might want to protect their children from. If you filmed the story of Ruth discreetly, you could get your film rated PG-13, which is just right, because 14 is high school, and you can still read the Bible at that Utah high school.

A little review. Naomi is a 40-year-old, widowed, childless Jew from Bethlehem. She's living there in Bethlehem with Ruth, her 24-year-old, widowed, childless, illegal-immigrant Moabite daughter-in-law. When the story started, we expected that a young Moabite woman living in Bethlehem, about five miles from Jerusalem, the holy city, would get into all kinds of trouble and dolor and loneliness, because Jews hate Moabites.

But contrary to all expectation, Ruth is doing just fine in Jewish Bethlehem, thank you very much! Everybody—and I mean EVERYBODY—is hugely kind to Ruth. One reason the story of Ruth is so charming and winsome is that there are no villains in the Book of Ruth.

¹Justine McDaniel, "Protester Opposed to Book Bans Gets Bible Pulled from Some Utah Schools," *The Washington Post*, June 3, 2023.

Ruth is gleaning very successfully in the barley fields of a prominent, 40-year-old Bethlehem landowner named Boaz, who takes one look at this unknown but fetching shiksa and is completely smitten. That's when mother-in-law Naomi swoops in to secure widowed, childless Ruth's future. She's like Fidelity or Charles Schwab: "Think about your future, honey! Let's plan ahead."²

And you won't believe what happens next. Naomi, this pious, observant, God-fearing Jew, tells her Gentile daughter-in-law, "This is what we're going to do: break out your smokiest eyeshadow and your reddest lipstick and your slinkiest skirt, and a come-hither tank top, and go back to Boaz's place." That's not an exact translation, but it is very, very close.

So that's what Ruth does. She goes back to Boaz's place, and there, after Boaz has had one or two or four glasses of wine and drifted off into never-never land, Ruth comes in and, as the Bible so delicately puts it, "uncovers his feet." And it won't surprise you to learn that "uncovers his feet" is a euphemism for something far less innocent. It's like when we say, "She slept with him." That is **not at all** what we mean. It's a euphemism for something less chaste.

Lo and behold, it works! Boy, does it work! Boaz takes this shiksa as his wife, and—Voila!—Ruth and Naomi get a nice little farmhouse with a mother-in-law suite, a 401K, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, and children and grandchildren!

Naomi and Ruth are crafty little mothers. They're shrewd, they're sly, they're somewhere between pragmatic and unscrupulous. They are not above using their feminine wiles to get what they need in order to survive. They're a paradigm for, or a microcosm of, the entire enterprising female gender. If all our men are going to die on us, if nobody else is going to help us, we'll just have to make it happen ourselves. If not us, who? If not now, when?

Because have you noticed that God is almost missing from Ruth's story. God is almost invisible in the Book of Ruth. God shows up twice—two times—in the 85 verses of the *Book of Ruth*. By the way, there's one book in the Bible where God never shows up once, and if you can tell me which one it is without looking it up, I'll buy you lunch.

In Ruth's story, God's providence is a stealthy, unseen influence lurking about in the story's shadows. God accomplishes God's purposes not overtly, or by reaching down a strong arm to manipulate human events, but through God's more modest, human agents—Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and Boaz' gentle, thoughtful farmhands.

"God is almost
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of Ruth."

It's funny how one small, modest, unassuming life—an illegal alien crop-picker—can change the course of history. Every word we speak, every deed we do, every choice we make, every habit we form, might have far-ranging consequences.

I've just finished watching two of the most popular and acclaimed television shows of the last seven years. Ted Lasso is an American football coach from Wichita with a goofy moustache who knows next to nothing about soccer, or English football. He has trouble grasping the concept of offsides for most of the show's 34 episodes, until he finally gets it.

But Ted Lasso is an Israelite in whom there is no guile, as Jesus might have put it. He is kind, humble, and infallibly incorruptible. After three soccer seasons, he has single-handedly transformed not just his team and his individual players but a whole community. Everybody he interacts with becomes a finer, fairer, kinder, more forgiving human being. Ted's decency is contagious; it is viral; everyone catches it; everyone is infected by it, for the better. To change the metaphor, Ted's charitableness is like a drop of purple dye in a glass of water.

So is Logan Roy's towering malice. *Succession* is the anti-*Ted-Lasso*. Logan's greedy, grasping, voracious, narcissistic, unscrupulous egomania wrecks everything in sight. It is just like Ted Lasso's civility; it is viral; it is contagious; everyone is infected by it. To change the metaphor, Logan Roy is like Midas—everything he touches turns to mufflers.

²I owe this insight to Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), vol. 7, pp. 28-29.

It's funny how one small, modest, inconspicuous life—like a migrant farmhand or an American football coach—or also a large, loud one, like Logan Roy's—can change other lives and even the course of history. Every word we speak, every deed we do, every choice we make, every habit we form, might have far-ranging consequences.

Even a fourth-grade teacher. I heard this story at *The Moth*. Ryan Roe from Pennsylvania was diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome when he was five years old. People with Tourette's have all these uncontrollable verbal or motor tics—inappropriate, ill-timed groans, shouts, grimaces, and gestures. Ryan calls Tourette's The Scarlet Letter—it's the first thing people notice about you.

The other kids weren't Ryan's problem. They all got used to his eccentricities and were not unkind to him. Ryan's problem was the teachers, a new one every year. They would try for a while through the school year, but eventually Ryan's Tourette's would exhaust their patience, and the mood around Ryan would change drastically. A teacher might exile him from the classroom and make him listen to lessons from outside the classroom door. Or they would tell him he should be home-schooled or go to class with the special needs kids.

And then Ryan met Mrs. Bragg in the fourth grade. Mrs. Bragg has been teaching for 30 years; nothing fazed her. One time Mrs. Bragg gave her class a fun, charming assignment. Each student was to learn about a famous Pennsylvanian, work up a presentation and give it to the class.

Well famous Pennsylvanians. There's a lot to choose from. William Penn, Betsy Ross, John Updike, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Joe Biden, Mr. Rogers, Joe Maddon, Mike Ditka, Taylor Swift. Ryan got Roberto Clemente.

Ryan had a blast spending hours in the library researching Roberto Clemente, but then it was his turn to make the presentation, and he was having a bad Tourette's Day. He couldn't get the words out, only grunts and groans and cries.

Mrs. Bragg takes him outside the classroom and says, "Young man, don't worry about it. You know Roberto Clemente had Tourette's too." Ryan is amazed. "Really?" says Ryan. "Yes, he did," says Mrs. Bragg. "He twitched just like you do. He had trouble with his interviews. But he never gave up."

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Ryan says, "That meant so much to me. It sustained me. When I would have trouble, I would say to myself, 'What would Roberto Clemente do?' For years, I would say to myself, 'Roberto would ignore what other people say, work hard, and keep going.'

But then Ryan says, "But you know, I never looked it up. Years later, I Googled it: 'Roberto Clemente and Tourette's.' Nothing. Roberto Clemente never had Tourette's. Mrs. Bragg had completely made it up to make me feel better. It worked.

"So for years my motto was 'What would Roberto Clemente do?' But now it's 'What would Mrs. Bragg do?'"³ Just a fourth-grade teacher, a migrant farmhand, an American football coach.

³Ryan Roe, "What Would Roberto Clemente Do?" *The Moth*, "Hesitations," May 30, 2023, https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=33580

—Prayers of the People— Becky Knight

Eternal God—we thank you for the wonders of everyday—for moonlight across water, for sunrise and sunset—for the expansive blue of Lake Michigan, for summer flowers and green, growing things. God of laughter, love, music, love, and friendship—we thank you for these gifts of ordinary life.

How grateful we are for this place of worship—for the quiet of the sanctuary—and the active sounds of this church in motion—for all the parts that make up the whole—for the work of every hand, for worship and prayer, planning and leadership, for the setting up, and the cleaning up—for the ones who came before us throughout the generations. We thank you for the community and connection we have found here.

Loving God today we celebrate and thank you for our fathers for grandfathers—for those who have been like fathers to us—for the steady, strong, and affirming love that enables growth.

We also pray your solace to those who miss or mourn their fathers, who long to be fathers, or for those who have not experienced the blessing of a loving father—we pray for those who feel fatherless.

Please Loving God, be present for those living where violence and guns are not an issue to discuss, but a real threat to everyday life. Please be with those who don't know where they will sleep tonight, are not sure where they will eat, or how they will adequately feed their children. Please be present to the hurting, the lonely, to those in pain, alongside those who are grieving and vulnerable, to the anxious, helpless, or hopeless.

Please look with compassion O loving God on all who suffer.

Motivate and inspire us to reach out in welcome, comfort and support, sharing our plenty with others.

Humbly we ask that you might renew us, the world, and this nation in your ways of justice and peace. Help us to listen intently, to speak respectfully, and to seek harmony.

Please restore in us gracious God, a love for the earth and help us live in balance with all of your creation.

And with all that you have provided for us, we ask that you continue to give us strength, patience, a sturdy faith—and a daily awareness and joyful gratitude for all your extravagant and tender mercies.

We hold fast to your promise always to be near us, as we join our voices as one to pray the prayer that Jesus taught us: Our Father...Amen.

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