

UNEXPECTED REDEMPTION

Unexpected Series (Part 5) | Ruth 4:1-11

Before we close today I am going to continue our series on the Book of Ruth but, before doing so, I want to reflect with on the turmoil in which we are living that especially begs for the redemptive wisdom we find in God's Word.

Some have asked me why we didn't abandon our sermon series last Sunday and speak to the crisis enflaming our society. *I mean, how BIG do the riots have to get, Dan, before you change up the sermon series?!* It's a fair question. If you took part in the whole service last Sunday, then you'll know that we DID take time to mark the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery and to beseech God in prayer for all these matters and our nation at this time. We used our CHAT feature to refer everyone to a reflection I'd written on HOW DO I RESPOND? But the main reason there was no sermon on the topic last week is because, truthfully, I was still getting my heart and head around all that's been happening. I think a lot of us are.

Michelle Goldberg recently remarked in a podcast that this has been a year that has condensed into six months the sort of crises it normally requires about 100 years to reproduce in one country. 2020 started off like 1974 (with an impeachment), quickly became like 1918 (with a pandemic), then transformed into 1929 (with an economic crash), and now feels like 1968 (with all kinds of unrest). My friend, Mike Woodruff says: "When you add Africa's locust plague and our upcoming presidential election—to say nothing of 'murder hornets'—it makes you a bit jumpy about what [comes] next."¹

In light of this, I wonder if we shouldn't all take a deep breath and cut ourselves and other people a little more slack. We're living through an unusually complicated and challenging season of history. We're doing our best to manage the emotions and swirling values that are at play in this time. Each of us is going to make mistakes. We're going to say and do *ignorant* things – or not say and not do *important* things that we'll revise later or will be sad about when we stand one day with Jesus.

How Do You SEE What's Really Going On?

And if that's true in general terms, then it's especially true around all the varying viewpoints that surround or all the issues that get magnetized by the death of George Floyd. Please stay with me as I talk about this, because it may not be obvious at the start and at points along the way exactly where I am going. I'll probably say some things that you nod your head at and others you'll shake your head at. My major purpose is not to tie everything up in neat bows today. I can't. But I hope I can get us thinking further together about how we SEE our times, RELATE to our brothers and sisters, and ACT in a way that advances God's redeeming purposes. So, let me begin by asking some questions about how YOU see what has been going on.

When you picture George Floyd, do you think of the volunteer church worker, who labored to stop youth violence, and who clearly blessed the lives of hundreds of people;² or are you focused on a man who used hard drugs, once pressed a gun against a pregnant black woman's belly while robbing her, and spent five years behind bars for assault and robbery?³ Could the reality of George Floyd be both?

When you ponder what happened that day in Minneapolis are you seeing yet another heinous act of abuse, murder, and violation of due process by police against a person of color; or do you also think of the larger enforcement community who have seen so many members of their circle violently killed?⁴ Can you hold both of those thoughts?

When we discuss the looting, destruction, and killing that's happened since May 25, are we just talking about appalling criminals and opportunists, serving themselves at the expense of law-abiding citizens; or are we talking about the kind of desperate and destructive acts that grow up in communities that have seen too much injustice and hopelessness? Could something in both of these interpretations be true?

When you consider the violence and poverty afflicting some inner-city neighborhoods, is the major issue that people can't boot-strap themselves out of conditions that dire without substantially more investment? Or is the problem that those communities aren't holding their own members accountable for more constructive behaviors? Might it take both approaches to make things better?

Given the fact that the U.S. has the highest per-capita incarceration rate in the world, is the disproportionate number of black and latinx persons in prison because there are just so many criminals in their communities? Or is there so much crime, because when you have a justice system that handles problems by warehousing so many people of color in your prisons, it tears their families and communities apart?

How do you view all this? If you tune in to the BLUE stations, you tend to get this storyline. If you tune into the RED channels you tend to get the other plotline. But what if the truth lies somewhere in the messy middle? In the debates that occurred in Israel during the first century AD, the progressive Sadducees and the conservative Pharisees each had their own certain take on the truth and Jesus challenged both of them. At one point he said: **Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are healthy, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are unhealthy, your body also is full of darkness (Luke 11:34).** The context here was a gathering in which people were asking God to show himself and reveal his plan to them. Ironically, God was standing right in front of them. Jesus had laid out the principles and practices of God's kingdom to them. But they had a different storyline ingrained in their minds and it darkened their understanding of where redemption would be found. They could not see that their eyes were not healthy, because it was through those eyes alone that they were evaluating their health.

We Need Greater Moral Clarity

It feels to me like this is a time in American history for all of us to check our eyes. I am trying to do that myself. Every time I speak or write these days, people kindly offer me help in taking the log out of my eyes, and sometimes not so kindly! I'm OK with that, because this seems like a season when we need greater MORAL CLARITY and the robust conversations we have with one another help sharpen our vision. In my view, fixing what is so obviously broken in our systems and relationships will require holding more than one narrow view of our problems. It will take weaving together a difficult balance of essential moral values.

For example, and for the sake of moral clarity, I believe we can care deeply about police officers, respect the American flag, not agree with every tenet of a political organization, and still say emphatically that "**Black Lives Matter.**" At a time in our country when so many of our Christian brothers and sisters are wondering what white Christians think and feel about the pain and losses in their lives, it seems especially important to say that. Yes, black lives matter greatly to God, to us, and to American society. The practice and teaching of Jesus compels the Christian church to stand against any form of racism and work toward a kingdom where all lives have equal dignity, are protected against abuse, and have the realistic opportunity to flourish.

Secondly, we can honor the right and even the necessity of public protest where a society or its systems need change, while simultaneously condemning acts of vandalism, looting, and violence that hurt even more people. Justifiable anger may explain the temptation to do such harm, but it can't excuse it. God says: **Thou shalt not steal (Exo 20:15)**. Two wrongs don't make things right.

However we evaluate the tactics of our State and Federal authorities, we must also be morally clear that it IS the job of governments to maintain law and order and seek to restore peace. The Apostle Paul writes: **Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established... The one in authority is God's servant for your good. (Rom 13:1,4)**. So long as sin exists in the human heart, the idea of completely defunding police departments seems dangerous and naïve to me. At the very same time, the prophets of the Old Testament would hasten to remind us to be clear that there is no lasting peace without advances in justice. We would be foolish to think that tear gas and batons will bring the peace we want, much less the *shalom* God wants. That requires repairing injustice.

While I may upset some people when I say this, it is morally legitimate for officers of our government to use reasonable force against bad actors. Again, St. Paul writes: **If you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants... to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (Rom 13:4-5)**. I would quickly add from the wider counsel of Scripture, however, that use of such force

or punishment must fit the circumstances and be consistent with the law. It did not in the case of George Floyd and has not in too many other cases affecting people of color. God plainly says, **Thou shalt not murder (Exo 20:13)**. We have seen enough unreasonable force used that insisting on real reforms in the training, screening, and disciplining of law enforcement seems our clear moral responsibility at this time.

Now, I want to pause here and apologize if I'm boring you or insulting your intelligence with this Bible Civics lesson. But, to paraphrase George Orwell, it feels like *"we have now sunk to a depth at which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent people."* A society that won't swiftly move to hold accountable those who steal, lie, destroy, murder, or otherwise defy the rule of law needed for the public good is not operating as the Bible instructs. For this reason, we ought to step up our efforts to thank and support all the conscientious government workers, fair judges, faithful cops, and courageous guards who are extending and sacrificing themselves as "servants for our good." And, again, at the same time, we also need to speak and act clearly when these authorities or we as citizens fail in doing good.

One of the highest Christian values is the command of Jesus to: **Do unto others as you would have them do unto you... love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 7:12; 22:39)**. When we translate this calling into the language of legal and governmental systems, it finds its expression in the phrase emblazoned on the pediment of the U.S. Supreme Court: Equal Justice Under Law. In other words, everybody should get the treatment any of us would want to get under the law.

You'd think I'd be especially enlightened about this. My brother clerked at that Supreme Court and is now a federal judge. Another brother and sister-in-law teach at prominent law schools. My father worked in government till he was 80. I have married and buried police officers and count a number of them as friends. In other words, almost every experience I've had with the law has been positive, from my vantage point. When I did criminal things as an adolescent, I got off or let go. When my family needed help later on, there was a top lawyer who took care of matters. On the rare occasions I've been stopped by the law since then, the officers have been polite or actually pleasant. The various American systems – family, education, economics -- have worked well for me.

I've learned that's not been the experience of everyone, especially many black and brown people. There's a long painful history to this. It's not just about the killing of people like Ahmaud Arbery or George Floyd, though these become the events that draw up all the other anger and despair. I've listened and read enough to believe that – even for all the good progress we've made and the good people in so many roles – there are inconsistencies and inequities that flow through our policing, criminal justice system, housing policies, education and employment practices that negatively impact or do not resource the lives of many non-white people in a way different than people like me.

That may sound like *political-correctness* to some people. I hope you see that wanting to achieve a more perfect union between the ideals emblazoned on our monuments and the realities happening on our streets is actually *patriotism*. I'd like to "solve racism" this year. I think that, however, may require the Second Coming of Jesus or some massive spiritual revival. I'm praying for both, but I do think that a more concrete and achievable interim goal would be for us to link arms and efforts to move our society substantially closer to provide Equal Justice Under Law?

What if, when there was an abuse of authority or a violation of due process, especially when it resulted in a pattern of harassment, wrongful imprisonment, or death of anybody, all of us spoke up, condemned it, and called for change? I think this is what Admiral Mike Mullen, 17th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was doing when he recently wrote in light of current events: "*We must ensure that African Americans—indeed, all Americans—are given the same rights under the Constitution, the same justice under the law, and the same consideration we give to members of our own family. Our fellow citizens are not the enemy, and must never become so.*"

We Need Greater Ideological Humility

There IS a disturbing spirit of enmity that taints so much today. As I suggested earlier, I wonder if part of the reason that we've gotten to this point in our political and cultural conflicts is because we've settled into seeing things in a pretty binary or blindered way. The main problem is with THEM, whoever THEY may be. Truthfully, THEY probably do need to change some things about themselves. But when was the last time you were in a conversation with someone in your tribe and they said, "*You know, I think that one of the obstacles to our world getting better is ME?! I think I need to lighten up, open up, step up, wise up, grow up, look up more.*"

The transformation of individuals and communities will move forward faster on the round wheels of humility than on the hard-cornered wheels of certainty and self-righteousness. If the affairs of our society are going to get better we need not only greater moral clarity but also greater IDEOLOGICAL HUMILITY. What do I mean?

An ideology is a deeply-ingrained storyline about what is wrong, who's to blame, and how things get fixed. Most of us have got a certain ideology about American history, politics, race, or even our marriages and families. We develop our ideologies to make sense of life, to fit in with others, and we naturally like to be with a tribe who shares our ideology. I confess to that myself. But we need a broader exposure if we are to grow more like Jesus, or advance his kingdom, or draw closer to the other amazing people of this world. That takes the humility to open my eyes wider – to look for truths and tensions I may not have seen before – to get a bigger and better picture of reality.

I was talking this week with Terrance Campbell, an African American member of Christ Church, who also heads up Graduate Admissions at Wheaton. We were discussing the

tremendous turmoil of our society right now and how we, as followers of Jesus, could take some kind of redemptive actions. Terrance, in his characteristically gentle and reflective way said, "*Dan, I think it comes down to raising up a PLEA.*" I resonated with that statement. The word PLEA fit my sense that we need God to act -- that we don't know how to repair our society on our own. But then Terrance went on to say that the word PLEA was an acronym or memory device.

The first constructive thing Christians can do right now, he said, is to PRAY. Pray for a spirit of lament and humility to come over our country, so that we all awaken to and turn from whatever sin keeps us from loving others as God loves us. Pray for kids growing up in the inner city. Pray for police officers under pressure or in harm's way. Pray for judges and urban school teachers. Pray for people who wish their lives mattered more to others. Pray for a heart like Jesus toward all the people you meet.

The second redemptive action is to LEARN. If you're anything like me, you're very tempted to think that you are educated enough. I've come to see that because of my limited lens, there is a lot about the experience of black and brown people in America that I've had little clue about, misunderstood significantly, or willfully ignored. If you go to our website and click on the box that says, ACT REDEMPTIVELY, you'll find a wealth of movies, documentaries, books, and other resources that can help us keep learning together. I hope you will read at least the first two books on our list.

The "E" in PLEA stands for ENGAGE. God made and cares for people of every race. I believe it's no accident that he's put a lot of color in America today and the percentage is growing. God's giving us the opportunity to develop the intercultural skills needed to evangelize and influence the world. If the Book of Revelation is right, many of us will be together in heaven for all eternity. So let's get to know one another now. As our State starts to open up, let's engage in more conversations across racial lines -- ask about each other's experiences and what wisdom each of us might offer to make our churches and country even stronger.

And then, finally, let's ACKNOWLEDGE what God reveals to us as we pray, learn, and engage. I can almost guarantee this: If we actually take the action steps my brother, Terrance, recommends, God is going to change the way we SEE him, ourselves, other people, and our times. We're going to want to work for greater justice. As that happens, I hope you'll acknowledge and talk about that. Your witness inspires others.

We Can Choose the Way of a Kinsman-Redeemer

As I said at the start, there is a final message for us in the opening verses of Ruth chapter 4 with which I'd like to close. If you read that text for yourself, you will meet two people who have a lot in common but one crucial difference. Both of these individuals -- a man named Boaz and another the Bible only names "So-and-So" -- were Jewish, a tight-knit tribe. Each of these people was presented with an invitation to

exercise toward a Moabite named Ruth the role of what, in ancient Israel, was called a **Kinsman-Redeemer**. To do so meant choosing to view someone from a very different tribe as family. It meant committing to supporting a level of flourishing for them that, given their present social and economic conditions, they simply could not produce without help. For all kinds of historical and cultural reasons it was a huge reach for a Jew to embrace a Moabite. Building that relationship would require effort and sacrifice for either man – as well as for Ruth the Moabitess herself.

As you'll read in the text, So-and-So made the decision that he wasn't up for that task. He would stick with his own kind. It was less costly in every way. But Boaz made a different choice. He engaged his life with Ruth and she with him. It redeemed and renewed both of their lives in a glorious way. And, as you will see more clearly when we return next week, their decision to join their journeys together paved the way for the coming of the ultimate Kinsman-Redeemer, the Savior of this world.

Here's the deal. You and I have a similar choice to make in our time: Stick with our tribe, our current estate and manner of seeing, the way things are now... Or open our heart and our life to the Other, view them as our kin, commit more deeply to each other's well-being, and all the redemptive possibilities that engagement can bring forth. Which path will you choose? I hope it is the way of the Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

The Benediction

As we close today, I wanted to let you know that Suanne Camfield devoted her sermon this morning at our 9:00 Classic Service to a more extensive study of Ruth chapter 4. I encourage you to listen to her wonderful message, if you can. For those of you interested in my own take on the full content of Ruth chapter 4, I hope you'll circle back to our website this afternoon and click on the "Sermon Notes" tab under the video of this 10:45 service. You'll find a manuscript of THIS message you can read or print out AND at the bottom of that an extensive Bible Study I've prepared on the text of Ruth 4:1-11.

And now, go forth in all the love, power, and hope of the Gospel message. Seek out the way of the Lord, humbly praying, learning, engaging, and acting. And thus may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Heavenly Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit lead us all toward greater justice and peace this day and forevermore. Amen.

BIBLE STUDY ON RUTH 4:1-11

Supplemental Resource for the Unexpected Series (Part 5)

In order to speak directly to the national events and issues surrounding the death of George Floyd, I departed from the expository study of the Book of Ruth that has been our pattern over the past five weeks. I've supplied here, however, a deeper dive into the biblical text and storyline of Ruth for those interested in it. –Dan Meyer

Review

Over these past several weeks, we've been following the lives of the Jewish woman Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. Tragically bereaved by the death not only of her husband but also her two sons, Naomi realizes that she has no continuing life or hope for survival in the land of Moab and decides to return home to her native Israel.

Bidding her daughter-in-laws, Ruth and Orpah, goodbye Naomi is stunned to be told by Ruth that she will no longer be traveling alone. Ruth has decided to go with her – to give up her own homeland, her own best prospects for remarriage and survival, her own family and culture and religion in order to care for and companion Naomi until the end of her days.

The devotion of young Ruth to her mother-in-law remains one of the most amazing displays in all of literature of what the Bible calls "**hesed**" or "**= steadfast love.**" Only rarely do human beings attain to "hesed" in their relationships but, each time someone does, it serves as a reminder of the kind of indefatigable, self-sacrificing love with which God loves you and me. [1 Cor 13]

With the future uncertain save for the strength of this "hesed," Ruth and Naomi make the arduous journey from Moab back into the land of Judah and to the region of Ephrathah, southeast of Jerusalem, where Naomi's husband Elimilech had once held some land. There in Bethlehem, the two women take up humble residence, resorting to a lifestyle of begging just to survive. Each day Ruth goes out into the fields to glean the scraps of barley or wheat left behind by the harvesters so that she and her mother-in-law will at least have something to eat.

While doing this, however, Ruth attracts the attention of the owner of the fields, Boaz. The two of them strike up a conversation and discover that there is a kinship relation between Ruth's dead husband and Boaz. Boaz ultimately takes Ruth under his protection and allows her to work with his servants, providing a better and steadier source of grain for Ruth and Naomi. The two women wisely perceive that Boaz is a fine, honorable man. It occurs to them that if he would marry Ruth, all their problems would be solved. Naomi hatches a plan to increase the likelihood of that outcome. She

sends Ruth to Boaz by night. Amidst an intimate encounter of some kind on the Threshing Floor, Ruth asks Boaz to take her under his wing and he in turn vows to marry her.

There is a precedent for this sort of thing in Israel's life. It is a tradition called "levirate marriage" – a convention by which the closest surviving relative of a dead man might marry his brother, son, or cousins widow and provide her with a child -- thereby keeping the deceased man's family line and property-ownership going into the future. The man who performed this marriage duty was referred to as a "Kinsman-Redeemer." It seems that this levirate tradition was part of the arrangement that Ruth and Boaz sought but, in following that pattern, there was a slight problem: Boaz wasn't the nearest kinsman in the family line. Technically speaking, someone else had the right of first refusal.

The Story Concludes

When we left the story last time, Boaz had promised Ruth that he would approach this Nearer Kinsman and see what he could do to secure his option. Ruth had gone home to Naomi to wait things out. As the suspense mounts in the home of the two women, the Bible's camera swings over to follow the actions of Boaz, and it is there that we pick up the story. The final chapter of the Book of Ruth, verse 1...

Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat there. When the kinsman-redeemer he had mentioned came along, Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down. Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. (Ruth 4:1-2)

Now, let me pause for a moment here and say something about this setting. Over the years, archaeological studies have revealed that the gate areas of most ancient Israelite towns included a courtyard that was lined by benches. Biblical texts suggest that these courtyards served as a common public meeting place in which many business transactions were handled and disputes resolved. A person could not only go to the gate area and be fairly sure he'd eventually run into someone he was looking to find; he would also be sure that if there was some issue to be worked out with that person, there would be plenty of other witnesses on hand to verify the outcome of the discussion.

When, in verse 1 & 2, we see Boaz stopping his relative at the gate and inviting him to sit down with him in the company of **"ten elders of the town,"** Boaz is in effect convening a simple court of law. It is the Palestinian version of the "People's Court." It's also interesting to note that when Boaz refers to the nearer kinsman as "friend" he is actually using a Hebrew idiom that is less charitable than that. The literal Hebrew term there is *"peloni almoni."*

When “peloni almoni” is used to describe a place it typically means “such and such a place” – as for example we find in 2 Kings 6:8 - **Now the king of Aram was at war with Israel. After conferring with his officers, he said, "I will set up my camp in such and such a place."**

When “peloni almoni” is applied to a person, however, it is probably more aptly translated as “So-and-So.” It carries with it the suggestion that the of the place or person is ultimately unimportant to the tale, or maybe that the place or person is, in reality, slightly degradable. That may be the import here, as we’ll soon see.

Then he [meaning Boaz] said to the kinsman-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our brother Elimelech (Ruth 4:3). Now, it is only at this point that we discover something that we’ve not known about Ruth and Naomi’s condition up to this stage: There’s some real estate at stake in their lives. Apparently, Naomi’s husband Elimelech had left behind some land in the area that now needs to be dealt with. Naomi aims to sell it and it is here that the story is open to some interpretation.

Theory #1 -- The land is lousy, as in unproductive. Maybe it was a useless piece of property (like a piece of property in Hawaii once given to a church I served in California). How else do we explain the fact that Naomi and Ruth are left to scarp in other people’s fields for grain?

Theory #2 – The land is occupied. It is extremely unlikely that an arable piece of land would have been left abandoned and untended for the more than ten years that Elimilech and Naomi were down in Moab. Famine conditions in Israel would have made every inch of cultivatable real estate important. Almost certainly, someone would have grabbed it up and started to use it. This is the very problem that another widow in scripture faced. In 2 Kings 8, we read of the prophet Elisha helping a woman who’d returned from living in another area during a 7-year period of famine only to find that someone was squatting on her land.

It’s possible, I suppose, that it was actually this “So-and-So” relative of Boaz’ that is now using the land. If that is the case, then Boaz is saying, in effect, “Ante up and buy the land, dude, or get off it.” In any case, the land clearly now needs to be sold. In the levirate tradition, the nearest kinsman of the deceased landowner ought to – at the very least -- buy his relative’s land so that his widow would have some income to live on. Going one better, he would optimally take to himself BOTH the land and the widow, thereby committing himself to caring for each as an act of service to his dead brother or cousin.

Apparently, however, it has been several months now and this nearest kinsman has done nothing to act on this responsibility. Either he is shirking his responsibility or – if

he is squatting on the land – he is even more of a scoundrel still. The latter might explain why the text refers to him as a “So-and-so” instead of gracing him with an actual name. In any event, bringing up with him the subject of his neglected responsibility is bound to be a pretty touchy task. We all know how hard it is to go to someone who by all rights should have been doing something but just hasn’t delivered. In those situations it is always easy to either be too soft or too hard, isn’t it?

For this reason, it is worth learning from the way that Boaz handles this encounter with the nearer kinsman. It would have been easy for him, in righteous anger to aggressively accost the man and demand to know why he hasn’t acted on behalf of Naomi and Ruth. We could imagine Boaz pushing the man and demanding that he either fish or cut bait. It might have been easy, on the other side, to approach the problem too passively. Boaz might have shifted nervously from one foot to the other trying to mumble out his request, and ultimately leaving the other guy just smirking and going on his merry way.

Instead, however, the way Boaz speaks here is a model of gracious, tactful strength. I don’t know why, but I picture Anthony Hopkins in this role. I see Boaz with Hopkins’ steely eyes, staring steadily into So-and-So’s... **I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line" (Ruth 4:4).**

Let’s just break this statement down and consider the **STEPS TOWARD CREATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION** this simple incident offers us...

- Step 1: Assume that there is no wrong motive on the part of the other. (“I thought I should bring the matter to your attention.”)
- Step 2: Describe (not demand) a creative action. (“I suggest that you buy it.”)
- Step 3: Bring in some reasonable others should there be sincere doubt as to the other’s capacity to listen or act responsibly (“in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders”)
- Step 4: Explain the possible outcomes and your stake in them. (“if you will redeem it... if you will not... I am next in line.”)

Apparently, this approach is fairly potent. You can picture the nearer kinsman swallowing hard, looking around uncomfortably at the elders seated around him. **"I will redeem it," he said.** It is at this point, however, that we discover for certain that Boaz is committed to something more than simply seeing that the land gets purchased. Boaz doesn’t just want to see justice get done, he wants to see people cared for. **Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi and from Ruth the Moabitess, you acquire the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property" (Ruth 4:5).**

Now, at face value, with this statement Boaz just seems to be reminding the man of ALL the provisions of levirate marriage. The fullest possible expression of "kinsman-redemption," you see, would involve three different dimensions: First, the deceased man's land was to be redeemed from going fallow by having a man to work it. Secondly, the dead relative's widow was redeemed from poverty and loneliness by gaining a new husband and home. And, thirdly, the family line of the deceased man was also to be redeemed. The way that worked is that the former wife and new husband would have, if possible, a son (if she had no surviving ones). This son would then grow up and inherit the property, as if he were a full son of the original owner of the land.

It seems possible here that Boaz was seeking to remind the nearer kinsman here that he couldn't very well just take on the profitable part of the deal (acquiring the land) without also taking on the honorable part of the deal (taking in Naomi and Ruth). "*You can't have the cash without the compassion.*" If the nearer kinsman had in fact been squatting on the land, then he sorely needed this reminder and probably the additional pressure of having the issue brought up in the company of the town elders.

Let me observe, however, that there is an alternative way to read this text. Biblical Hebrew, as you may know, is a consonantal language. That is, it works like those vanity license plates we get for our cars. [Explain Masoretic pointing system]. The Masoretes weren't entirely sure how to read the consonants in verse 5. The translation we have was their final verdict on the text ("*On the day you buy... you acquire the dead man's widow*").

But the original or oldest translations of the text actually read -- "*On the day you buy... I acquire the dead man's widow.*" If this is the more accurate reading then we can infer two things: First, at this point in Israel's history, redemption of the land and redemption of the family line were not necessarily connected. More importantly, it would tell us something about the passion and strength of Boaz' convictions. Boaz would basically be saying: "*I feel it is only fair to tell you – before you redeem (buy/acquire) this property, that I plan to marry Ruth and raise up a future claimant to the title on that piece of land.*"

I suppose we'll never know for sure what the original words were. We don't know whether the nearer kinsman was spooked by the thought of having to take on another spouse (one is enough of a blessing for most of us!), or by the thought that one day a grandson to Elimelech would show up at this door and rightfully claim the property. In any event... **At this, the kinsman-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it" (Ruth 4:6).**

The text goes on to provide a little insight into how legal transactions were signed and

sealed in ancient times – presumably reflecting the fact that by the time people were first reading this story, things were no longer handled that way... **(Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalizing transactions in Israel.) So the kinsman-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal. Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelech, Kilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabitess, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from the town records. Today you are witnesses!" (Ruth 4:7-10)**

To some of us, this statement of Boaz' about having "acquired Ruth the Moabitess" may sound a little offensive – as if she is a piece of meat that can be traded between men. On some level, of course, marriage worked a bit more like that in ancient times, but even here the English translation is probably overly callous. The word for "acquired" is the Hebrew word = "qana," which actually has a range of meanings. It is frequently associated with the idea of paying a price to take to oneself that which one deeply values. Exodus 15:13 reads, **"In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."** This is the sense in which the word "qana" is meant here, I think.

Then the elders and all those at the gate said, "We are witnesses" (Ruth 4:11) In other words, the elders confirm that the deal is legally concluded.

Thoughts To Take With You

1. How have you experienced life like Naomi and Ruth?
2. List some of the painful trials you've been through.
3. Now list the ways in which you have seen God do something redemptive in, through, or in spite of them.
4. Is there any relational conflict in your life from which you might learn from Boaz' approach to confrontation? (see list of pointers on handout)
5. Where might God be calling you to take action (human instrumentality) in the face of some "unfruitful" situation before He will bring forth fruit (divine intervention)?

¹ Michelle Goldberg, [The Argument](#). Referred by the Rev. Dr. Mike Woodruff, senior pastor of Christ Church Lake Forest, whose [Friday Update](#) newsletter contains many such gems.

² [George Floyd Left a Gospel Legacy in Houston](#), Christianity Today, May 28, 2020.

³ [George Floyd Had Violent Criminal History](#), New York Post, June 2, 2020.