

“FOOD FOR THOUGHT: LEFTOVERS”

Ruth 2

July 14, 2024

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No one seems quite able to agree on what sort of book Ruth is. Is it a romance, a feminist critique of patriarchy, or a defense of King David’s checkered history? Is it about the love between two women and their journey to overcome tragedy or the invisible hand of God directing history? One thing is certain. The twists and turns of the plot accompanied by some ambiguities in some of the actions give the story much food for thought.

The story opens with a famine that compels Naomi and Elimelech to move with their two sons from Bethlehem to Moab where the sons marry two Moabite women. In the course of three verses and ten years, the men die, leaving Naomi with just her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah.

When Naomi hears that the famine is over, she determines to return to her homeland and instructs Ruth and Orpah to remain in Moab where they might hope to find husbands. Orpah sees the wisdom in this, but Ruth refuses to part from Naomi, declaring: “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people. And your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (1:16-17)

Ruth’s words of devotion are sometimes read at weddings as descriptive of the sort of love that binds two people together in marriage. They are not idle words, for Ruth has little to hope for in Naomi’s homeland. As a widowed foreigner, the prospects for marriage or other means of support are slim. Beyond her child-bearing years, Naomi will be utterly dependent on relatives for shelter and food. They have only a life of poverty to look forward to.

And yet, Ruth refuses to accept this state of affairs. As we pick the story up in chapter two, she says to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.” She is relying on the law in Leviticus that provides for the needs of the poor and the foreigner. “When you reap the harvest of your land,” it reads, “you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien...” (19:9-10).

Ruth intends to sustain herself and Naomi with the “leftovers.” What she actually brought home represented an abundance. Here’s the first food for thought: Israel provided for the poor by law. They set in place a system that gave the poor and the stranger adequate food for their needs. And they were not unusual. The right to glean was established in many nations and cultures of the day and it continues in many places around the world.

The vineyards behind the church we served in Pennsylvania were harvested by machine, but it still left the grapes on the ends for gleaning.

Gleaning isn't terribly practical today with so many of our poor living in cities. The government has provided other safety nets to sustain the poor. The size of that net varies based on the mood of the country and the will of representatives. Religious and non-profit organizations do what they can to meet the needs, but food insecurity statistics and the current housing crisis suggest that as a country, we are falling short in our responsibilities. The farm bill, which expired in December is still waiting for many of its provisions to be renewed. You'll have an opportunity next week to write letters urging congress to take action.

So Ruth goes out to glean in the hope that she will follow someone in "whose sight she may find favor." It is possible that she means nothing more than the harvester in front of her will take a liking to her and leave extra grain behind, but typically the phrase expresses the hope for a potential husband. She's young enough. She can still bear children. And even though the community continues to refer to her as the "Moabite," she thinks of herself as belonging to this people.

It will be enough if the favor extended only means a good harvest for her because there is potential for harm. She may be chased off the fields. She may be verbally abused. She may even be raped. Israel and Moab were actually bitter enemies.

As it happens, she is in Boaz's field. He shows up and his treatment of Ruth suggests several possibilities. Is he a righteous man who recognizes and goes beyond the requirements of the Levitical law to insure that Ruth takes home a good harvest? Or does his kindness reflect the method of a predator? Or has he actually fallen for her? Is this a story about healthy community, a tragic tale, or a love story?

The unfolding plot shifts us away from some interpretations, but it doesn't change the reality that Boaz holds all the power and that Ruth is in a very vulnerable position. In chapter three we'll learn that Boaz is a potential "redeemer" for the family of Elimelech; that is, he could marry Ruth, father children and restore the line of Elimelech. This is referred to as Levirate Marriage, though it doesn't technically apply to Ruth. Strictly speaking, the law asks that he marry Naomi, but since she can't bear any more children, this would not achieve the law's purpose. As a foreigner the law didn't apply to Ruth. But again, Boaz goes beyond the letter of the law, and agrees to "redeem" the line by marrying Ruth.

But he doesn't have to. He has the power, the authority to refuse. Instead he takes action to remove the one impediment to resolving the situation. There is another with a better claim to be "redeemer," and he arranges for that person to renounce his claim. Here's a second thing to think about, food for thought: Boaz goes beyond the letter of the law in order to satisfy the spirit of the law. Just like someone else we know who urged us to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, to not only rid ourselves of murderous thoughts but to let go of hate altogether.

It wasn't enough for Boaz to provide for the poor. He wanted to use his privilege to raise them to abundance. He wanted to restore them to a place of respectability. It makes me wonder about our hopes for the poor; not just a meal or shelter for a while, but dignity, respectability, abundance. From serving up leftovers to holding a feast!

Having said that, the movers and shakers in this story are Ruth and Naomi. Even though they don't technically meet the standards of the law, they act to receive the justice that they are due. Ruth is a person of integrity from the beginning. The community acknowledged, respected, even admired her devotion to Naomi. It is this reputation that secures "favor" from Boaz. Though she has no authority, she exhibits a power that begins the process of redemption. And though Naomi has no rightful claim on Boaz, she sends Ruth out to make a claim. They have made Boaz aware of the right thing to do.

So we, too, attend to the voices of the poor, the hungry, the stranger, the oppressed. Is it possible that someone's redemption is waiting on us, that a gleaner awaits our favor, that some good depends on our integrity? Something to think about. Food for thought. Amen.