

God's Risky Business

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Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44

Text: "She said to her, 'All that you tell me I will do.'" -- Ruth 3:5

We come this morning to the PG-13 section of the book of Ruth, where the story veers a little from the path of what we in the church would call respectable behavior. Last week, you'll recall, we talked about Ruth's decision to accompany her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Naomi's homeland, and how such selfless behavior exposes us to what saints are all about, and now, this week, things become a bit more risqué, but perhaps no less saintly. Let's see.

Naomi and Ruth have returned to the hill country of Judah, the same general region where Bethlehem is located. In order to survive, Naomi sends Ruth out into the fields with the other village woman who don't have husbands or sons to glean, that is, to follow the reapers as they harvest the crop and collect the scraps left over. This is how poor people have survived in agricultural societies since time immemorial, and because God demands that God's people care for the poor, God instructed the Israelites not to harvest their fields completely, but to leave the edges of the fields unharvested. Here's what Leviticus says about it (19:9-10): "When you reap the harvest of your land, 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: I am the Lord your God."

Having neither husband nor son in a patriarchal culture, the Moabite Ruth is both poor and alien in Israel, so she is allowed to glean, and one of the fields that she gleans is the field of Naomi's well-to-do unmarried relative, Boaz.

And here we get to the part that Hollywood would particularly like. Ruth has caught Boaz's eye, and this fact has made its way back to Naomi, as all such facts do in small towns and villages. So Naomi instructs Ruth to pretty herself up – take a bubble bath, put on her best dress, do her hair and nails, put a little special perfume where it can't be missed – and slip up to the threshing floor at night, where the men are sleeping during the harvest, and pay a little midnight visit to Boaz. She's to find where Boaz is sleeping, without letting anyone else discover that she's there, and then Naomi tells Ruth, as chapter 3, verse 4 says, to uncover Boaz's feet.

Now that's a euphemism. To uncover the feet in Bible-speak means to uncover the feet . . . and the ankles . . . and the knees . . . and the thighs . . . and, well, you don't stop uncovering until you reach the bellybutton. The Bible is delicately saying that Ruth is, essentially, to take Boaz's pants off. And then, as Naomi says, Boaz will tell Ruth what to do.

And that's where the future of everything for Naomi and Ruth hangs in the balance. We don't know what might happen when Boaz discovers that an unmarried woman has crawled into bed with him, and that's what makes this part of the story so important.

In our sex-saturated and sex-obsessed culture, we've forgotten the severe sanctions that accompany sexual transgressions of women in patriarchal societies, but in Ruth's day, what she was doing, at her mother-in-law's suggestion, was extremely risky. Ancient Israelite society was thoroughly patriarchal, and one of the features of patriarchy,

then and now, is male control of female sexuality and reproduction. Women and children in patriarchal cultures, ancient and modern, are the property of men, and men always seek to control who has access to their property and how that property is used. This is why female sexual behavior has always been regulated much more carefully than male sexual behavior has been, and why female sexual infractions have been punished much more severely.

We still occasionally hear of so-called “honor killings” in Islamic families, when the male head of the family believes that a female for whom he is responsible, usually a daughter, has brought shame on his family because of her behavior, usually involving some sort of perceived sexual indecency. On New Year's Day in 2008, for example, two teenage sisters were shot dead by their father in Irving, Texas, simply because they had boyfriends of whom their father did not approve.

Islamic leaders are quick to point out whenever this happens that it is patriarchy and not Islam that sanctions such violence against women, and the same is true of the patriarchal world of the Bible. Ruth and Naomi could both have been stoned to death in that patriarchal culture had Ruth's behavior been discovered, but both women decided to take the risk in order to preserve their own lives and their family line.

And the plan worked. Boaz was understandably surprised by his night visitor, but he recognized in Ruth's actions the loyalty to Naomi and Naomi's family that had brought Ruth to Judah in the first place. Boaz knows that Ruth has literally risked her life, a second time, to protect her mother-in-law from destitution and even worse, and it is that loyalty that captures Boaz's heart.

And we know from the rest of this brief and beautiful love story – a story about romantic love, family love, divine love, and love for doing the right thing – that Naomi's risky plan and Ruth's risky behavior are both part of God's providential care for the chosen people. God provided for Israel its greatest leader in the person of David, Ruth and Boaz's great-grandson, and God provided for us and for all people an even greater leader in the person of Jesus, another of Ruth and Boaz's many descendants. God's purpose for the world always involves risk, always demands stepping outside the norm and the acceptable, and going where others are too afraid to go.

The Bible is filled with stories of women and men who risked everything to heed God's call in their lives. Heeding God's call is always risky business, and if you took those stories of risk-takers for God out of the Bible, you'd have very little Bible left.

Leave your ancestral home, Abraham heard God telling him, and go to a place that I will show you, and I will make your descendants more numerous than the stars. You and I are among those innumerable descendants of Abraham who are still trying to make the ways of Abraham's God – the ways of justice and righteousness and peace for all people – our way and earth's way.

Moses, go down to Egypt and tell pharaoh that his enslavement of the Hebrew people is over. Go down and tell one of the great empires of the world that the foundation of their economy and way of life is about to be undermined. Go down and tell one of the mightiest military powers in the Mediterranean world that you and your God and your God's enslaved people will defeat pharaoh's horses, chariots, and men. Go down, Moses, and tell ol' pharaoh that.

And what sort of crazy risk was it to entrust the message of the gospel to a bunch of people who clearly didn't get it, who abandoned the one who preached and lived it, and upon whose teachings and example a frail and fallible institution known as the Christian church has been raised? Surely God could have found a more reliable, less risky way to spread the word and transform the world.

And yet this is how God chose to do it. God chose, as Paul says, “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27), and in so choosing, God showed us our own divinity. God became flesh not just once, but over and over again, choosing to enter the world through cracked pots

such as us. God reaches out, again and again, asking us to open ourselves up and become the divine beings – the children of God – that God has made us to be. And we must risk if we are to accept that invitation.

Grace Hopper, the first woman to hold the naval rank of rear admiral, is famous for having said that ships are safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for. We humans are safe, more or less, armed to the teeth in our walled fortresses and economic domination of others, but that's not what children of God are for. You and I were not created for that. You and I were not created to grasp, to claw, to exploit, to seize every advantage for ourselves and our loved ones before others even have a chance. You and I were not created to growl and snarl over our little bit of creation like a vicious dog with a miserable bone. We were not created for that, you and I.

We were created for something better. We were created to renounce growling and snarling and the snapping and biting that our dog-eat-dog world calls business as usual, calls normal. We were created to renounce economic violence no less than armed violence, the violence the have's have always waged against the have-not's. We were created to leave our comfortable ancestral land where we learned domination and exploitation and greed-is-good and we-can't-live-without-trashy-trinkets and someone-must-be-in-control-so-it-might-as-well-be-us – we were created to leave that life and land behind – and take ourselves to that place where God has already shown us what living with enough for everyone looks like, a land flowing with milk and honey and justice and righteousness and peace.

That is what we were created for, you and I. We were created to risk everything – our own security, our own happiness, our own prosperity, even our own survival – for the sake of God's love for the world, the whole world, no exceptions, not even terrorists. It is a huge risk to allow nasty people to nail you to a cross, but that's the risk God chose to take, and without that risk, without that cross, there is no resurrection.

The Christian gospel, my dear friends, promises us none of the things the world promises and says we cannot live without. The gospel does not promise us a well-heeled life among respectable neighbors in leafy burbs. The gospel does not promise us popularity and acceptance among the movers and shakers. The gospel does not promise us that we can have what the world defines as all.

The gospel of Jesus Christ promises us this and only this: eternal life with God in that realm which has no end. That's the promise that awaits those who are willing to take the risk of the cross, the risk of resurrection, the risky business of God.

Let us pray. Thou hast made us for thyself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee. Amen.