



Central Peninsula Church

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Ruth 3
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It Happened One Night

SERIES: *Romance and Redemption*

Do you believe you have a soul mate? A dream lover? A romantic destiny that is written in the stars? That's the premise of countless Hollywood blockbusters. Take one that's been around awhile: *Sleepless in Seattle*. A woman named Annie played by Meg Ryan, falls in love with a man she's never met, a widowed architect named Sam, played by Tom Hanks. Though she is engaged to a successful businessman named Walter, she becomes obsessed when she hears Sam's voice on the radio. Annie believes that if the two of them could just meet, Sam would fall in love with her and they'd live happily ever after. So she breaks her engagement and flies from Baltimore to Seattle to pursue this stranger on the radio.

Every once in awhile the movie cuts to the night time sky, where we see the stars in the heavens realigning themselves to bring Sam and Annie together. When the two finally meet, it's clear that indeed they have found the love of their lives. Their eyes meet and they just lock onto each other and there is magic in the air. The message is clear: your soul mate is out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered. Don't settle for a boring substitute. Follow the stars!

Do you believe that's how it works? Many people do. The result is that they go through life believing that one day that prince or princess will come. They go through relationship after relationship, bailing out when struggles and obstacles are encountered, because that couldn't possibly be what fate had in mind.

This morning, as we continue our study of the book of Ruth, we see something of God's plan for the unfolding of mature, romantic love between a man and a woman. When we look at Ruth and Boaz, we see a relationship that is magical in its depth and richness, but it's rooted in the reality of everyday living. Remember that Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, has lost her husband and two sons in Moab. She's returned to Bethlehem with Ruth clinging to her side. They're dirt poor, but God provides for them through a relative named Boaz, who allowed Ruth to glean in his field. Boaz treats Ruth with special favor. We're led to wonder if something will develop between Ruth and Boaz. Chapter 2 ends with Ruth gleaning in Boaz's field through the harvest. Though the issue of food seems resolved for a while, there is still one thing missing: Ruth still has no husband. Without a husband, there is no hope of having children to carry on the name of her deceased husband. In that culture, this was the greatest of all tragedies.

So we come to chapter 3 wondering, will God provide a spouse for Ruth? Will she find true love? Is Boaz the one? Now, you and I know that it's God's will that Ruth and Boaz get married. They're to be the great grandparents of King David and in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. God has great plans for this couple. Yet they don't know that. But the question is, what are the ingredients that came together to create a marriage for Ruth and Boaz, and what are they for us? How do we find true love?

Chapter 3 offers us a number of principles in answer to the above questions. The first has to do with seizing the opportunities the Lord arranges.

I. SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITIES 3:1-5

"Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, shall I not seek security for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman, with whose maids you were? Behold, he winnows barley at the threshing floor tonight. Wash yourself therefore, 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. It shall be when he lies down, that you shall notice the place where he lies, and you shall go and uncover his feet and lie down; then he will tell you what you shall do.' She said to her, 'All that you say I will do'" (vv. 1-5).

Naomi comes up with an ingenious plan to get Ruth and Boaz together. Naomi wants Ruth settled in life before she dies, which meant finding her a husband. And it seems to Naomi that the best shot at finding a husband for Ruth is Boaz. Boaz is their kinsman and as such he has certain obligations to them. God's law said that if a man died without a son to inherit his property, then his brother or another close relative should marry the widow and father a child to bear the name of the deceased man and inherit his property. Although it wasn't a crime if he didn't do it, it was a shameful thing to refuse to do. (As a man, it sure makes you think twice about who your brother chooses to marry!). So Naomi says, "He's our kinsman. Let's ask him to step up to his responsibility." Besides, Boaz has shown every sign of caring for Ruth. He's already shown Ruth special favor.

So Naomi concocts a plan. She tells Ruth to get herself looking good – to take a bath, put some perfume on and her best dress. There's nothing wrong with looking good. Then she tells Ruth to go down to the threshing floor where Boaz and the whole town was winnowing barley and wait till he had finished eating and drinking. The threshing floor was not just a place to work, but also a place to celebrate. If she waited a while, Boaz would be in just the right frame of mind to make a move. And then her plan really gets kind of steamy. Boaz would be sleeping out there to guard his barley and Naomi says to wait till he's all alone and asleep and to sneak up on him and uncover his feet and lie down with him. Boaz would no doubt be woken up with chilled feet. Then he would find Ruth. Naomi says when he finds you let him take it from there. He'll know what to do! Gee, what does that mean? But it's not what you think. Naomi is betting on Boaz's high character. She designed the whole thing to be romantic, even sensual, but she also trusted Boaz's moral restraint. She believed Boaz to be a man of integrity and purity.

Some think Naomi is just a scheming mother-in-law

taking matters into her own hands rather than trusting God. But there is something we can learn from Naomi. Naomi's acting upon an opportunity that was orchestrated by God. God was the one who arranged for Ruth and Boaz to meet. God was the one who allowed Ruth to be singled out by Boaz for special treatment. God was the one who made provisions in his law about the kinsman-redeemer. In coming up with this plan, Naomi was just following the signposts that God had placed in her life.

Sometimes we have to seize the opportunities God places before us. Sometimes it's wrong to just sit back passively and wait for God to do something. We might call that faith, but sometimes it's exactly the opposite; it's sanctified fatalism, i.e. "whatever will be will be." There are times in life to wait and trust God, but when God has worked to give us signposts upon which to act and we sit back and do nothing, that's not trusting God, that's presuming upon God! It actually requires more faith to take the initiative like Naomi did! I'm not a big proponent of women asking men out, but sometimes single women feel like if they don't nothing will ever happen. Unfortunately, they're often right. I think single men need to learn to take the initiative based on the signposts that God provides.

So, the first thing we see here is that Naomi saw the opportunities provided by God and came up with a plan. But, would the plan work? Let's see what happens next.

II. STEPPING OUT IN FAITH 3:6-9

"So she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had commanded her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and she came secretly, and uncovered his feet and lay down. It happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. He said, 'Who are you?' And she answered, 'I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative'" (vv. 6-9).

Everything up until now has taken place in the day, now it's night time. Everything up until now between Ruth and Boaz has been in public, now they're all alone. If this were a play, the stage would be empty and dark; just two shadowy figures lie on the floor.

Ruth followed Naomi's script to a "t". I hope you feel the tension. Ruth is sneaking around at night. Her heart is pounding right out of her chest. Boaz has just had a great meal and some good wine. He lays down and falls asleep when a dark figure tiptoes up, lays down beside him and gently folds back his cloak from his feet. Sometimes later Boaz wakes up, bends forward and groggily begins to feel around at his feet to get them covered up again. The writer says, *"Behold, a woman was lying at his feet!"* "Behold" is right! What a shock! He can see enough only to know it's a woman, but he still doesn't know who. He asks: *"Who are you?"*

Naomi said to just lay there and wait till Boaz told her what to do. But Ruth does more than that here. She not only answers his question but she proposes marriage! This

phrase *"spread your covering over your maid"* is an idiom for "marry me." It symbolizes a man's willingness to protect a woman as his wife. Ruth uses a word here for "covering" that is the same one translated "wings" in chapter 2. Boaz had said to her out in the field, *"May your wages be full from the Lord, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."* Here, Ruth is asking Boaz in essence to become for her those same wings. She's saying, "Perhaps you're the means of protection you prayed about earlier."

This is a very bold, risky step of faith. Ruth's putting everything on the line. What if she got caught sneaking around? What if Boaz misunderstood her intentions? But Ruth not only followed through with the plan, she took it a step further and came right out with a proposal. Not only do we need to see the opportunities God has provided, but sometimes we need to take a bold and risky step of faith. This is sure true when it comes to marriage. No one ever got married without taking a risk. Marriage is always something of a step of faith. We do our best to be prepared for it. We do the premarital counseling. But, do we really know what we're getting into? Can we really be sure that that person will turn out to be a trustworthy marriage partner for the next 50 years? Do we really know how we will feel after 50 years? Do we know how our spouse will feel?

Someone told me about a 50th anniversary their grandparents had celebrated together. They were by then, I'm sure, great-grandparents, because they were in their 70s. Ted had lost much of his hearing during this time. And yet they were still getting along together and celebrating this great anniversary. Their family came from all over and enjoyed celebrating together through the midmorning into the afternoon. Finally, toward sundown, all the family went home. Bessie and Ted decided to walk out on the front porch and sit down on the swing and watch the sunset. The old gentleman pulled his tie loose and leaned back and didn't say much. Bessie looked at him somewhat in wonder and said to him, "You know, Ted, I'm real proud of you." The old gentleman turned and looked at her rather quizzically and after a moment said, with a puzzled look on his face, "Well, Bessie, I'm real tired of you too!"

No matter how well we know that person and how prepared we are, it's still something of a gamble. But it's one that God calls most of us to make.

So, we've seen Naomi see the opportunities that God provides. And then we've seen Ruth take a bold, risky step of faith. And this brings Boaz to the point of decision. We're now holding our breath. How will Boaz respond?

III. SERVING THE INTERESTS OF OTHERS 3:10-11

"Then he said, 'May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. Now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence'" (vv. 10-11).

Boaz is quick to calm her fears. He begins by blessing her and speaking of her kindness. This is the Hebrew word hesed which means loyal love – love which sticks someone. He says that her last hesed is even better than her first. Her first act of hesed was her decision to leave Moab out of devotion to Naomi.

Why does he call this marriage proposal an act of

hesed? It seems as if she's doing this for herself. She loved him, didn't she? But, it was an act of kindness because it was really done out of loyalty to Naomi and desire for her to have progeny. In reminding Boaz that he was a kinsman, she's saying that their first born would be offered to Naomi to continue the line of Elimelech and her deceased husband. It was also an act of kindness because, as he says, she could have married a younger man. She could have looked for some young stud, but she chose Boaz out of loyalty to Naomi. As a matter of fact, neither of them met each other's expectations of what they might have thought they wanted in a spouse. I'm sure Boaz was older than the man Ruth had dreamed of marrying. And I'm sure Boaz never expected to marry a Moabite. That's how it often is in marriage, isn't it?

And then in v. 11 he says *"I will do what you ask, I will take you as my wife."* And then notice what he says, *"...for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence."* Why would he say that? Is he just saying, "I'll marry you because you are a good catch?" Well, that's part of it. She was a good catch! She was a woman of character. He knew that because he had watched her in his fields for several months. This was not love at first sight. This was love born out of months of watching each other in the muck and mire of real life. But we also see something here of Boaz's kindness as well. We see it in the way he speaks of her as a *"woman of substance."* He champions her as a woman of dignity and worth. He doesn't treat her as a Moabite slave girl, but as an equal, as one who he was fortunate to have, a gift!

Throughout this passage every person is acting with a view to the interests of others. They are acting with hesed. Naomi's concerned that Ruth find security. Ruth's concerned that Naomi find someone to carry on her husband's name. Boaz is willing to fulfill his responsibility to the clan and champions Ruth's dignity and worth. Everybody is concerned about the interests of others.

Unfortunately, when we talk about love and romance we seldom hear about these ideas of kindness and loyalty. It's almost as if these ideas are seen as antithetical to love and romance. The focus is usually on what I want and what feels good for me. We think we kind of fall into love and if duty is in any way involved it's not real love at all. But, these people in our story have bigger concerns than their own feelings and their own wants. They're concerned about loyalty and kindness too. No where do we get a sense that this takes away from the romance. There was lots of romance here. Romance without hesed is really just infatuation. You can't build a marriage on the foundation of romance, but vice versa – you build romance on the foundation of hesed. Men need to ask themselves, "Am I willing to spread my wings over the woman? Am I willing to champion her as a woman of excellence?" Women need to ask, "Am I willing to respect and follow this man?"

If we stopped reading and the story ended here everything would be perfect. But in every good love story there has to be some kind of obstacle? In vv. 12-13 we read of Ruth and Boaz's obstacle.

IV. STAYING WITHIN THE LIMITS 3:12-13

"Now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem you. But if he does not wish to redeem you, then I will redeem you, as the LORD

lives. Lie down until morning'" (vv. 12-13).

Their obstacle is the fact that there is a kinsman closer to Naomi than Boaz. This, by the way, is probably the reason that Boaz hadn't tried to marry Ruth earlier – there was one in front of him. The closest relative had the first right of refusal. So Boaz says that first thing in the morning he'll give that man his chance to redeem Ruth. If he does, so be it, but if he doesn't, she's mine. This had to be hard for Boaz. I wonder if God was testing him? There is no doubt that he was in love. He wanted her, but would he have her on his own terms? Would he treat her as someone he has the right to possess? He shows his integrity by his willingness to stay within the limits of the law and have her only on God's terms.

We see him staying within the limits in one other area as well. No doubt Boaz was aware that a woman running around Bethlehem at midnight wasn't safe. So he tells her to remain the night with him; to lie down with him till morning. But did he have another motive for having her stay? We're left to wonder what really happened that night under the starlight on the threshing floor. How hot did it get? There is no question in my mind they wanted to be together. They certainly had this perfect opportunity. As a matter of fact, they could have reasoned, "Well, if we make love tonight we can ensure that the nearer kinsman wouldn't want Ruth," because he wouldn't. But they didn't. If they had his actions the next day of offering her to the closer relative don't make any sense; she would be his for good. So Boaz stays within the limits of God's word not just with regard to the closer relative, but also with regard to his passions.

If you want to find true love you have to stay within the limits. It would have been so easy for Boaz and Ruth to fudge a little bit. It wouldn't hurt anyone. No one would know. Do you know how our integrity is tested? By what we do when no one will know. But they were so much in love! And to stay within the limits was so risky because it might mean that the whole thing will fall apart. What if that other man says yes tomorrow? Then the whole love story is shot because of their insistence on playing by the rules. But staying within the limits of God's word is so important because it's only when we do, and things still work out, that we know God was the One who did it. What if Ruth and Boaz had went for it that night? What if they had avoided the other relative? They would always have a lingering doubt that their relationship was the result of their own manipulation rather than the work of God. But as it was they could stand with confidence before God in their relationship. He'd brought them together. They'd played by His rules even when it meant giving the whole thing up.

I often talk with engaged couples about why they should wait until marriage. One of the things I tell them is that it's better for their relationship. It's better for it now, and it's better for it later. For now it forces the couple to develop intimacy without sex. And in the long run, there is no greater gift you can give to your marriage than a history of obedience; a clear conscience; a shared sense that you obeyed God together when it would have been so easy to fudge. If you want to find the love of your life, you have to make Christ the Lord of your life. That's why we ask couples who are living together and want us to marry them to first stop living together. "But it's so inconvenient. We can't afford it." But I say, "You do what's right and God will take care of

the rest.”

V. WAITING FOR GOD'S SOLUTION 3:14-18

The chapter ends with Ruth and Boaz parting ways.

“So she lay at his feet until morning and rose before one could recognize another; and he said, ‘Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor.’ Again he said, ‘Give me the cloak that is on you and hold it.’ So she held it, and he measured six measures of barley and laid it on her. Then she went into the city. When she came to her mother-in-law, she said, ‘How did it go, my daughter?’ And she told her all that the man had done for her. She said, ‘These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said, “Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”’ Then she said, ‘Wait, my daughter, until you know how the matter turns out; for the man will not rest until he has settled it today’” (vv. 14-18).

Boaz was no doubt concerned for secrecy because if word got out that they spent the night together Ruth's reputation would be spoiled. So he sends her away secretly and as he does, he heaps over 50 pounds of barley on her back. It's possible that this was another precaution since it would make it look like Ruth had been out working.

Ruth went back into the city and reported back to Naomi. I doubt that Naomi had slept that night! As soon as Ruth got home she told her the whole story. She showed her the huge amount of barley he gave her and told her something we hadn't heard before. Boaz had sent the barley saying, *“Do not go to your mother-in-law empty-handed.”* This word “empty-handed” is the same word Naomi used in chapter 1 when she complained that she had gone out full but come back “empty.” Naomi's no longer empty.

As in chapter 2 Naomi has the last word. She tells Ruth to wait, to hold on, because Boaz was the kind of man that would settle the matter right away. The chapter ends with them waiting, just like in chapter 2. Their waiting is a sign of their patient trust in God. There is a time to act in bold faith and there is a time to wait in quiet faith. There comes a time when all we can do is stand by and wait and pray. There comes a time when we are powerless to change anything. In those times, God's will gets done by our waiting.

CONCLUSION

We know it was God's will that Ruth and Boaz get together. They wanted to get married. God wanted them to get married. The angels in heaven would breath a great sigh of relief when they finally get married. But, how is it that they would find the love of their life? How do we find the same thing? We find it the same way they did. *We find the love of our life by making Christ the Lord of our life.* Sometimes that means seizing the opportunities following the signposts that God provides. Sometimes it means stepping out in faith in a way that is bold and risky. It means that we're focused on serving the interests of others; thinking about the kindness and loyalty, as well as desires. It means that we're willing to stay within the limits of God's word; refusing to have the relationship on our own terms. And it means we're willing to wait for God to do the work we can't do.