

April 13, 2008

“It Doesn’t Add Up” Ruth 4:1-12

FCF: The appeal and allusiveness of unselfish living

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because God has added us to His family,
(magnet) our lives are to be lived by a whole new set of calculations.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Generosity and “giving back” have been big in the news this past week. Which reminded me of this story in USA Today a few years ago ([READ IV2 quote](#)):

We were in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, in East Africa, during a famine. It was so bad we walked into one village and everybody was dead. There is a stench of death that gets into your hair, gets onto your skin, gets onto your clothes, and you can't wash it off.

We saw this little boy. You could tell he had worms and was malnourished; his stomach was protruding. When a child is extremely malnourished, the hair turns a reddish color, and the skin becomes crinkled as though he's one hundred years old.

Our photographer had a grapefruit, which he gave to the boy. The boy was so weak he didn't have the strength to hold the grapefruit, so we cut it in half and gave it to him. He picked it up, looked at us as if to say thanks, and began to walk back towards his village.

We walked behind him in a way that he couldn't see us. When he entered the village, there on the ground was a little boy who I thought was dead. His eyes were completely glazed over. It turned out that this was his younger brother. The older brother kneeled down next to his younger brother, bit off a piece of the grapefruit, and chewed it. Then he opened up his younger brother's mouth, put the grapefruit in, and worked his brother's jaw up and down. We learned that the older brother had been doing that for the younger brother for two weeks.

A couple days later the older brother died of malnutrition, and the younger brother lived.

We hear such stories and they move us – our emotions, perhaps to tears. But they serve us best when they move us to questions. What would make that boy do that? What would cause such generosity to flow from his heart? And what would make it flow from ours?

SCRIPTURE READING: [Ruth 4:1-12](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

“New math” – I’ve heard of it for so long I had to look it up ([READ Wiki quote](#)):

New Math was a brief dramatic change in the way *mathematics* was taught in *American grade schools* during the *1960s*. The name is commonly given to a set of teaching practices introduced in the U.S. shortly after the *Sputnik crisis* in order to boost scientific education and *mathematical skill* in the population so that the supposed intellectual threat of the *Soviet engineers*, reputedly highly skilled mathematicians, could be met. In the consciousness of many *Americans* in the late *20th* and early *21st* centuries, *New Math* is reputed to have been a relatively ineffective approach, sometimes the subject of mockery.

So now I’m relieved on two counts. First, it’s not being taught any more. Second, 1 plus 1 still equals 2. It’s good to know things haven’t changed that much. Or have they?

The Apostle Paul wrote ([2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). For the Christian, things have changed quite a bit. Why? In Christ, the God who was once our condemning Judge is now our loving Father. Once orphans with nowhere to go, we’ve been added to His family. Which now means a new way of seeing and living, of adding and calculating.

Which brings us to Ruth 4. We know Naomi and Ruth will be cared for. But by whom? The answer to that question comes at the gate of Bethlehem. Such gates were hubs of activity, the forum, the place where public affairs were discussed. Here we get our answer. And in the process we also get a contrast – not only between two men but also between two ways of living before God and living before one another. And then a great call as well. For when we have been added to the family, our lives are to be lived by a whole new set of calculations – possibly in ways that otherwise would never add up.

I. FOCUSING ON WHAT WE HAVE TO GET

Two men are set before us, the first of whom takes the approach of focusing upon what we have to get. This is the man Boaz stops at the gate, this other “redeemer.”

Two customs were converging here. First, there is the “levirate marriage.” If a man died without children, his line was to be continued through the widow’s marriage to another man and through her having children “for” the dead man. Then second, there is the redeemer – among other things, one within a family charged with the redemption of property that had been sold by a poor relative. These two customs converged here. All that said, here’s the main thing we need to keep in mind. Naomi had a need and right to sell this land. And Boaz chose this moment to raise the matter with this other kinsman.

A) Calculations

So we have the preservation of both the family line and the family land – the two of which together proved to be too much, too costly in this man’s calculations.

1. Initial appeal

Now initially, this seemed to be quite the deal (READ Ruth 4:3-4). In essence, Boaz is saying, “*Naomi needs to sell the field. You, as a kinsman-redeemer, could buy it and keep it in the family.*” It initially seems like a great investment. For specified amount, he could carry out a respected duty, enhance his reputation, and acquire use of the land.

2. Fuller picture

But then comes the fuller picture (READ Ruth 4:5-6). “*Not so fast. This isn’t just about the land. It’s about the line. You must marry Ruth, raise a child, and when he grows up, the land is his.*” This means going to the soccer games, paying for the piano lessons and the braces, and then saving for college. And building an extension onto the house for the mother-in-law. “*I can’t do it. It’s too much*” is the reply. Buying the property and then giving it away, along with all these extra expenses, it was simply too much for too little.

B) Results

Such were his calculations. And the results? Anonymity. Notice we don’t know this man’s name. Why? There is no future in a life devoted to self and to playing it safe.

1. The meaning of the reference

(READ Ruth 4:1) This rendering is a bit too kind. Literally, he is referred to as “such-and-such” or “so-and-so.” He is the original “man with no name,” an anonymous relative.

2. The meaning of not having a name

Now surely Boaz knew his name. But the narrator substituted it in the story. Why? He proves to be but a bit player. He is not significant, not worth our remembering.

He shows his true colors. He considers only what he can get, what he can gain. “*One must be practical. There is so much at stake, too much to lose.*” So he plays it safe.

Illustration:

Think with me of investment approaches and the difference between the caution we show when it’s your retirement fund and when it’s just a game of Monopoly. You’re free to risk when it’s not real. But what if it is real? Think of student driving. You’ve got both the experience of the instructor and the power of his brake. So you can drive. You’re free because of who’s with you. So there’s no need to just play it safe.

Application:

Now expand on that. Mr. So-and-So was a calculating businessman, only concerned with the bottom line. And why not? If all you see is the bottom line then you had better be calculating. But what if there’s more to it? (READ Luke 12:13-21)

Jesus' point is that it is great folly thinking this life is all about storing up treasure on earth. It's a matter of kingdom building. But whose kingdom are we building? Let me put it this way. What is our agenda? Do we see our days as opportunities to glorify God by serving others? Or just ourselves? Do we love God enough to put ourselves at His disposal by loving our neighbor? How can we check ourselves? Well, we have the log entries. Examine your daily planner. Or your bank statement. Ask yourself, "*Why? What is it that this shows, that this reveals about me?*" Press hard here. Where are we tempted to live the same as "Mr. So-and-So"? The new math has come. Because God has added us to His family, our lives are to be lived by a whole new set of calculations.

II. FOCUSING ON WHAT WE HAVE TO GIVE

Looking beyond what we can get to what we can give. This takes us to Boaz.

A) Calculations

For Boaz, in his calculations, the land and the line, this ground and this girl, were not too costly to be redeemed but too precious not to be redeemed. And so he takes the sandal. An ancient symbolic custom. Since they walked the land in sandals, the sandals themselves become the moveable title to the land. Give it and you give the land itself.

But why would Boaz accept this and all that came with it? Two things.

1. Who is the LORD

First, Boaz was a man who knew the LORD. The book of Ruth is soaked through with prayer. (READ Ruth 2:4) A routine greeting Boaz offered his workers and their reply. (READ Ruth 2:12) Boaz' kind and generous invitation to Ruth to glean in his field. (READ Ruth 3:10) Boaz' response to Ruth's visit. Each of these a prayer to the LORD.

2. He is the LORD's

Boaz was a man who knew the LORD. And he knew he was the LORD's. You see it in his responses throughout this account – words and actions of kindness and HESED, that faithful love in the context of shared covenantal life. All of which flowed forth from the words and actions of kindness and HESED from the LORD Himself to His people.

B) Results

This formed the math, the calculations of Boaz. And the results? Not anonymity but blessing and prayer from the people (READ Ruth 4:11-12). What's going on? People just don't tend to act this way – especially in the times of the judges. The people recognized this, saw the LORD at work, and could not help but to bless and to pray.

1. For Ruth

The first expression fell on Ruth, the bride. All of which confirmed her new status as an Israelite. "*May she be like the founding mothers of Israel, bearing many children.*"

2. For Boaz

The second expression focused on Boaz. "*Through a large family, may you prosper and enjoy fame among us. And even more, through your serving as the kinsman-redeemer, preserving this land and line, may you establish a line and a name for yourself.*"

Like Mr. So-and-So, Boaz showed his true colors as well. But having been given so much himself, he could not help but then give forth from the whole of himself.

Illustration:

Something akin to the church of Macedonia in the 1st century (READ 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Every time I read this, this thought hits me. People don't insist on giving as though they are wealthy unless they see themselves as wealthy, unless they see more than the bottom line. This then frees them to give of themselves in radical ways.

Which reminds me of a story I've shared before ([READ Faith Promise, pp.4-5](#)):

Dr. Hugh McCain, a missionary who served in Chiang Mai, Thailand, told of an impoverished church in an isolated area of Thailand. The 400 members, each painfully poor, were diligent to give at least 10 percent, usually more, of their meager income to God's kingdom work. Though their weekly wages averaged less than 20 cents, they had done more for Christ than any other church in Thailand. They paid their own preacher, supported two missionary families in an isolated community, and were intensely interested in all forms of Christian work, especially work for unfortunates of all kinds. Their love for Christ overflowed with joy to make Him known. This "church of overflowing hearts," was a church of lepers. Every person had leprosy.

Application:

It's a whole new way of adding things up, of calculating the bottom line. Which is what you see in Boaz. From any other way of thinking, this land and line were a lousy investment. Too much to give and too little to gain. But Boaz was a glad and cheerful giver. He was willing to absorb personal loss in order to do what was right and good.

Which takes us to some questions. What about us? When it comes to our time, our talents, our treasure, are we prone to think of it all as "mine," hoarding with tight fists or as His, giving over with open hands? Think about how we weigh things, how we assess decisions before us. *"What's in it for me? Will it fulfill me? Will I enjoy it? Is it worth it? What will it cost me? Will I be recognized? What will I have to give up?"*

We get the answers all wrong because we've left so much out of the equation. We've been brought into God's family, made one of His own, set free from that we might see and serve in a whole new way. We should be asking, *"Is this good? Will it glorify God? How can I serve Him? How can others see the love and power of Christ in me?"*

CONCLUSION:

We have an answer to our question – how were Naomi and Ruth to be cared for? And we have our contrast – between lives focused on what we can get versus what we can give. Two ways of living before God and living before one another. Two ways with a gulf between that call for entirely different ways of calculating and adding things up.

So, getting back to the question we started with, now we have to ask, "How?" How can we give of ourselves, how can we live such lives of gracious abandon? By keeping ever before us the One who gave Himself for us with gracious abandon. Think back to Psalm 23. The Lord is our Shepherd. It's a recurring image in the Scriptures. He is also the One we read of in John 10 ([READ John 10:11-15](#)). The answer to the "how can we love in such ways?" is Him, the One who has loved us to the end that we might begin again, the One for whom we were too precious in His sight not to redeem.

Ruth was Boaz' beloved, the object of his affection, worth any price, any sacrifice that she might become His. Imagine the sense of accomplishment, of anticipation that filled his heart as he went back to her that day. And the look in his eyes as he saw her. Know that Jesus looks upon His own, His beloved ones, with that same look, that same affection even now this very moment. He is the One the people of the Old Testament such as Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz were waiting for and trusting in. Indeed, as we'll see next week, the One who came even through them. Secure in His love, secure in His care, they were and we are freed to live in a whole new way. Knowing who He is, whose we are, and what He's done to bring this about, that is what can cause such kindness, such HESED, to pour forth from us. And to live according to a whole new set of calculations.

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