

“Blessed Be the Lord  
Who has done all this!”  
Sermon for 29 January 2017  
Texts Ruth 1:8-18

We got as far as Naomi’s repentance which I maintain can be seen as a parallel to the repentance and return of the younger son in the parable of Jesus in Luke 15:11ff. Jesus parable is either the last of three, or the third of four parables advanced by the Lord as explanation of His “receiving of sinners and eating with them.” (15:2) However, it might be helpful to summarize Jesus’ answer thus: I associate with sinners because I want to see them in heaven! That, of course, should be our motivation, too. The first three parables all describe restoration: the owner of a lost sheep, goes out, finds it and returns rejoicing. **Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents that over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.** (v. 7) I have pointed out that the *reality* of heaven, and of activity there corresponding to events on earth is worth its weight in gold. The second parable, the lost coin parable, is, once again about the owner’s reclamation of what is hers. Against Jesus, asserting that His work with sinners here produces joy *in heaven* there closes with: **Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.** (v. 10) Naomi, if you follow my drift, is that one lost sheep, that lost coin and that *she is a sinner who repents* follows. All that and we haven’t touched the prodigal son parable. Here, there is a far country which corresponds to Moab. It is a pagan setting. Another parallel. And the younger son is a conspicuous sinner (dishonoring his father, squandering his wealth in reckless, or riotous living. The elder brother colors this as immoral: **devoured your property with prostitutes** certainly intimates who attended the younger son’s parties and what was involved. (Just how the elder son knew this is not disclosed, presumably he was not present.) But the emphasis is not on the sinning, but on the repenting and returning. These are the actions which parallel Naomi’s returning to Bethlehem. The homecoming is a communal event—family and servants join in the homecoming celebration. (The angels in heaven were probably rejoicing but that fact is not mentioned.) For the sake of closure, I will note that the joy in heaven resurfaces in a muted reference in the parable of the unjust, or dishonest manager: **I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.** (Luke 16:9) However, just as in the parable of the prodigal son, the wealth failing parallels precisely the catastrophe that visits Naomi in the book of Ruth. This last parable (Luke 16:1-9) is very complex and we are going to set aside any discussion of it for the time being. Let’s take from it that this failure of wealth that signifies the destitution of Naomi as she arrives back in Bethlehem, her husband may have been wealthy when they left for Moab—his family may have some residual wealth after the famine. Elimelech, being “prince of Judah” was wealthy as was Salmon, his brother, who is the father of Boaz. We note that Boaz owns the portion of a field that belongs to a wealthy relative is a man of substance.. So Naomi’s poverty is to be set within that family/social context<sup>1</sup>. What will her in-laws do to open the gates to her and her daughter-in-law Ruth?

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<sup>1</sup> There are at least five provisions in the Law for assisting with widows, orphans and foreigners. Poverty was believed to be temporary, and transitional. Part of the wonder of this story is how through God’s providence, wealth and prosperity are restored to the lost sheep who came home. First, there is the tribal allotment, or proportionment. In the year of Jubilee, every 49 years (a cycle of seven years, seven times—Leviticus 25:8-13—or the fiftieth year) original title had to be restored. This prevented the permanent alienation of land through leasing and mismanagement. “According to Leviticus, slaves and

However, we are not quite home yet. Naomi is on the road with her two daughters-in-law and this conversation ensues:

**8 . . . “Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!” Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. 10 And they said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, 13 would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.” 14 Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.**

Because of the potential difficulties that lie ahead, Naomi wants to release her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab. If they are going to convert to the Yahweh-ist religion and settle in Canaan, they need to do so freely. Furthermore, she has a high view of marriage. She sees it as a **kindness of the Lord**. (v.8) Then she adds: **The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband**. (v.9) Naomi is realistically concerned for these women. She knows that they might not find love, marriage and offspring in Judah. They might not find the “rest” which is security, provision, appreciation, honor, protection or a home/**the house of her husband** (!) within the marriage covenant. The biblical hope for marriage and for women is contained in this word “rest.” See Ephesians 5:25-33. To be sure, Naomi isn’t wishing trouble, strife, domination, fear or contention upon them—such as found in domestic tyranny, or abuse patterns of home life. Love, offspring, honor, a place of acceptance, personal fulfillment (such as describes the virtuous woman of Proverbs 31) is what’s in view. Women valued as women, women blessed by God as women in a honorable estate. Seen in these terms marriage is a divine provision for the blessing women and a vehicle for the producing of godly offspring. It is not paternalistic, or chauvinistic, an American or even Western cultural

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prisoners would be freed, debts would be forgiven, and the mercies of God would be particularly manifest.” (25:54) Wikipedia. Second, there was the law of the third year tithe, or poor tithe. This contribution was to be distributed locally, within the gates, so that the poor, the widows and orphans and foreigners would have provision—and not just for the Levites who taught the law and had no land allotted to them. (See Deut.14:28 and 26:12) The poor tithe is set forth in Deuteronomy (14:28 and 26:12) Third, there is the Law regarding gleaning (Leviticus 19:9-10): **When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. 10 And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God**. Fourth is the provision of the “kinsman redeemer” (Leviticus 25:18-19). And, fifthly, there is the provision of “levirate marriage” by which a woman without male heir might obtain a “son” by the deceased man’s brother (Deut. 25:5-10). Taken together these may be viewed as God’s heaven-sent, anti-poverty program—showing that God both cares about the poor and vulnerable and has given direction as to how the affliction of poverty might be averted, or ended.

institution. Of course, it takes cultural form in different settings and times—but these are variations on a basic theme, or template.

She wants them to be free from the vexations, cares and encumbrances that attend widowhood—to which women were exposed if they have lost their husbands in that society. She is not bashful about stating the case of their need, nor of promoting God’s best provision for them. And yet she would have them count the cost before venturing their vulnerable and uncertain futures with her in Canaan. Naomi urgently presses them to consider remarriage. **Would you wait? Would you refrain from remarrying?** (vv.11-13)

Isn’t it refreshing to hear some positive talking points for our discussion of marriage?! Naomi’s picture of “rest,” of coming home to one’s own house and husband. Coming home to a place of value, provision and protection where the duties of house and family are shared. Naomi’s “rest” links love, romance, marriage and offspring as desirable and fulfilling. Rather than personal happiness, mere companionship, and the fulfillment of sexual needs and expression, Naomi’s end is domestic! Marriage is a spiritual institution and a covenant that transcends various social and biological ends: rights, privileges and prerogatives. No wonder marriage is such a compelling analogy for the relationship of the believer with God, where Jesus is the husband whom we come home to!

Naomi is very realistic about life. **Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they might become your husbands?** Probably not. Yes, Sarah conceived in her old age as did Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. But those pregnancies were highly irregular, exceptional. **Turn back, my daughters, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and bear sons, would you therefore wait until they are grown?** This is the same as to say: **Would you therefore refrain from marrying?** What selflessness is here expressed! **No, it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.** Her situation is reminiscent of Job’s:

**Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.”** (which is what Satan would have him do!) **But Job said to her, “You speak as one of the foolish women would speak.** (A godly warning! Good spiritual leadership.) **Shall we receive good from the Lord, and shall we not receive evil?” In all this, he did not sin with his lips.** Job2:9-10

Job says a very profound thing here. What we know is that Job is engaged in a spiritual conflict which hides behind his circumstances, and his suffering. He is *vindicating* God without knowing it! And, as for Naomi, she has suffered loss perhaps as the result of her husband’s original misdirection, She is a wounded woman who has a huge part to play in the preservation and transmission of the seed of promise! *She doesn’t know this. She has no idea that the course of personal catastrophe, her real, grievous losses of husband and sons, were God-ordained steps towards a demonstration of divine faithfulness!* It is incontestable that God put her through all this. It is equally incontestable, that when Naomi came into relationship with Ruth God was preparing a vessel for the seed of promise, even the DNA of the Messiah. What is that worth? How much are we willing to suffer in order to be used of God, or useful to God?

The purposes of God redeem the sufferings of man. They overrule and give significance to experiences that, on the surface of experiencing them, may seem pointless, random,

accidental and even evil. Eventually there will be an Obed, a redeemer, in her arms, eventually joy and richness and wealth and blessing will come her way but on the way there, on the road back to Bethlehem, on the road to Obed lies destitution, fear, hunger, poverty, blood, sweat and blisters. There will be much anxiety, much stress, many disasters, much doing without—all on the way to her souls' satisfaction. But, someday it will come to this . . . **Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for you daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."** Yes, blessed b the Lord who has done all this!

At some point in time, it may dawn on us, that this story about her is the story about us. Job's wife deserts him . . . but appears to have been restored, along with all his fortunes and then some. **Then came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and ate bread with him in his house. They showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil (or disaster) that the Lord had brought upon him.** (Job 42:11) And then Job goes on and lives for another 140 years, through four generations! Blessed be the Lord, who has done all this!

Are you aware of the purposes of God at play in your life? Are you ready to be a hero of the faith regardless? Do you trust in the goodness of God and the ultimate triumph of the King? Will you do whatever godly thing that is required of you to bring Him glory and honor and praise? (let us pray about those things.)

**Amen.**