

"Nothing Incidental, Nothing Accidental"
 Sermon for 26 February 2017
 Texts: Ruth 3:1-13

As Christians we believe that *contentment lies in finding all we need in Christ*. This sustains us in dark times and thrills us in good times. But the story in Ruth underscores for us the total immersion approach that God takes in communicating His blessings to us—there is nothing incidental, nothing accidental. Now while this may not be obvious in the present moment, or in the heat of the moment, in retrospect we eventually may gain clarity—and see the kindness of the Lord is expressed by the kindness of Boaz. Funny that it takes a half-breed Jew reaching out to a foreign-born woman to demonstrate this—but who is to say that his family history (nothing incidental) which included the marriage of his father to Rahab the prostitute who harbored the Hebrew spies in Jericho, during the campaign that delivered that city to the people of Israel, predisposed him to treat Ruth—a lost sheep of Israel who happened to be a Moabitess!—kindly. He had experienced some of the anti-outsider hostility to which nations are subject, and he experienced it firsthand. Still, he was a judge in Israel, a worthy man of wealth, influence and character—still unmarried at a fairly advanced age. Ruth was much younger. His deferred marriage was God's opportunity. Yes, as it turns out, we know that the seed of promise was to be carried by Ruth through Boaz, the son of Solomon. This means that the seed did not come through Elimelech, but rather through his brother and that Elimelech's marriage to Naomi was God's vehicle for conveying Ruth from Moab to Israel. Not accidental! The right persons at the right place at the right time. *Nothing accidental.*

And this doesn't apply just to Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, but to the town of Bethlehem, to the whole community (the Old Testament "church") **at the gate** where the ten elders, **men of the city**, met, a combination of court house and town hall (the right "mix"), to determine the will of God in the case of Naomi—and, yes, in the disposition of Ruth. Someone held the right of redemption (the right to purchase the land belonging to Elimelech—the proceeds to go to Naomi for her care and support). When the first man initially says "yes," he has not counted on marrying Ruth—which he does not wish to do (thank God, we all concur) because it would compromise the inheritance he has already laid up for his own children. This last legal hurdle to the marriage of Ruth and Boaz needs to be cleared away properly—and so, true to his word, Boaz brings the legal issue up the very day He said that he would do so in the right way, at the right time, in front of the right people and all right away.

So, the initial "stir" (what to do with Naomi?) leads to public, legal action. The first redeemer exchanges sandals with Boaz signifying, testifying to a done deal! **Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife. (Ruth 4:10) It no longer matters who proposed to whom.** However, simultaneously, on the level of God's plan and purpose, enormously important pieces of salvation history have just been lined up! **Beyond the ken, or knowledge of any and all participants.** Therefore, we may conclude that all godly marriages are portentous—always salt, or light—a **catalyst** to the purposes of God! Personally, it was the marriage of Roger and Marylyn Bean which provoked me, at a tender age, to move beyond to "marriage could work" to "Marriage could work for me . . . maybe it is for me! The Beans delighted in each other and they had fun together.

As a result of this marriage potential, Naomi would be taken care of, Ruth would have the security of a family and Boaz would end up a blessed husband and father to Obed. ***The Messianic line was secured despite the ignorance of all the players as to their parts in it***—God works through the networking of all his people, all the time and what is to come, is established through the tapestry of all our interactions (all of them: sacred, profane, secular and religious) and through our experiences (all of them—working His purpose out). Naomi's loss of husband and her sons, (as in Ruth's loss of Mahlon) were sad and difficult things—hard to experience, bitter (Whoever said serving God was either pain-free, or easy?) Her losses were a preparing of the soil; they strengthened her, built her character and refined her heart. *It is never just what happens to you, but what you do about what happens that matters most.* Consequently, what we conclude is that God is able to redeem our worst for His best, that hard times may turn out, in the fullness of time, to be stealth blessings. God is always purposeful and never at a loss as to what to do. . . never late and always on time. *I am convinced that it has something to do with God being God!*

Question: Why wasn't Naomi satisfied with the first redeemer as a match for Ruth? It would be too facile to say, well, because he was not the one. Or, that would ruin the story. How would she know he was not the one? First, she might think something was amiss because he was already married and an established family man. (That turns out to be the key issue *from his point of view.*) That he was married should be a "show stopper" for any marriage shopper. A MARRIED MAN IS NOT AVAILABLE, NOT A MOVEABLE OBJECT, NOT UP FOR NEGOTIATION—ADULTERY IS FORBIDDEN! It may have been her female intuition—whatever that is. At any rate, God absorbs Naomi's bitterness in Himself: He takes it, weathers it, without quoting on her, without giving up—so she ends up not embittered against men, marriage or life and can pass on a positive outlook to her daughters-in-law. She may be scarred, but she is not scared of life; open, not closed.¹

Answer: More profoundly, maybe she knew that God's law is not necessarily contradictory to the course of human affections—falling in love could serve greater purposes as well as anything. After all, we recall, Eve was made "suitable" as Adam's companion. If God could do it for Adam with a rib for a template and some gathered dust, putting two life histories together is a "lesser miracle." Orchestrating two life situations is not so difficult—for God. *As we see . . . for this is what is recorded for us to ponder. (Even we catch ourselves exclaiming, "Aren't they darling" . . . they were made for each other. Really. Why should it be any different for Naomi or for Ruth? There is not a hint of dissatisfaction with regard to Naomi's previous marriage to Elimelech! Or, for that matter, Ruth's marriage to Mahlon. There is not*

¹ Again, from personal experience, the tragic loss of my three best friends, musicians all, in an alcohol-related car accident at commencement was very painful. It made me fearful to make friends for fear of personal betrayal, accidental death, or loss by relocation. I was scarred. However, if anyone had said to me, "Trust in the Lord, lean not on your friends," I hope someone would have corrected their misquotation of Scripture. It goes, "lean not on your own understanding"—my "understanding" of what had happened to them, to me, to us was very poor, weak and immature. With help I might have matured more fully through the whole business—the funeral helped. The pastor was very compassionate and wiser than I.

hint of unhappiness with any prior marriages; the husbands died. However, for Ruth to be available for marriage to Boaz, Mahlon's death is **necessary, something absorbable to a future divine purpose**. A friend told me recently that his brother's death was what turned his life around. This is not to say it couldn't have happened another way—it just didn't. Unhappy deaths, tragic losses, terrible afflictions are all "grist for the mill" so to speak.; they can and do serve greater purposes and later in life—viewed backwards, as it were—these sad losses refined character, developed perseverance and school us in patience. "Readiness is all" (Hamlet)

EDGAR

Away, old man. Give me thy hand. Away!
King Lear hath lost, he and his daughter ta'en.
Give me thy hand. Come on.

EDGAR

We have to get out of here, old man. Let me help you up. Let's go! King Lear's been defeated. He and his daughter are captured. Give me your hand. Come on.

GLOUCESTER

No further, sir. A man may rot even here.

GLOUCESTER

I can't go any further, sir. This is as good a place as any to die.

EDGAR

What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither.
Ripeness is all. Come on.

EDGAR

Are you depressed again? You can't choose your time of death any more than your time of birth. We live and die when our time comes. Come on.

GLOUCESTER

And that's true too. (King Lear, Act 5 scene 2)

Now it is one thing to assert that "contentment is finding everything we need in Christ," to believe that "nothing that occurs is accidental, or incidental" (Therefore every person has a role to play and a divine purpose to serve whether or not they are believers.), to accept that things may be murky and illegible in the present (which will make sense later in this life, or in heaven) and to live those convictions out. Do we believe that our "days are full of consequence if we walk within the bounds of God's will"? This implies that we can live a life of **attainable worthiness**. Boaz did it

back then, we can do it today. This is the testimony of Ruth. It is inspiring and reassuring all at the same time. Boaz's reputation of **worthiness** is demonstrable! ²

How did he do that?! And, for that matter, how did Ruth prove her nobility? And, even more stunningly, how is it that all three appear to have attained their "rest" in addition to living significant lives? By thinking godly, acting godly and doing so openly, we move from action (a choice), to habit, to disposition (a trait of character). *Holiness, then, is socially relevant, practical and real as it moves from devotional and private to public obedience.*

Is it permissible, if this is your take-away (and it is partially mine), or profitable to seek to live a life of *attainable worthiness* today? Well, let me respond like this: it is doubly possible for us. First, we can prayerfully walk in the thought-forms of Scripture. [I am teaching you one, right now!] Yes, we can read, study and inwardly digest the revealed Word and will of God and invite those words, that truth to be activated in us as we walk in our way His way. We can take to heart the Ten Commandments, the sermon on the mount, the letter of Paul to the Romans—which is one reason I say that it is doubly possible for us to walk worthily like the heroes of faith in Ruth, Boaz had the Pentateuch *and that was sufficient for him to find in God what we find in Christ alone.* The **sufficiency** of Scripture extends to all its parts. And each of the revelations I just alluded to will escort you to the same place. I mean to an *attainable worthiness*. How so? By being life, by the Word of God being life to us. And so it is. In trying to make sense of what happens to us, around us and through us, happenstance tends to dissolve and "history," like precipitation, drops out, or forms like a crystal—history is the crystallization of circumstances?— and, in the process, supplies us with "a proof" of divine interaction in our lives.

God loves us enough to work it all out thoroughly (even perfectly) even to doing it His way comprehensively—that is, intricately. He appears to be in all the details. He is seen, or found everywhere.

There is a striking lack of verbal citation of Scripture in Ruth. Boaz doesn't spout Scriptures but he lives it. His life is a life of consequence! Proof: as a leader in Judah and a judge in Israel, Boaz knows his obligation to widows, the levirate law etc; he knows what God would have him do—knowing, rehearsing, enacting and obeying God's laws, customs and practices. And he does it. So, we conclude it is not merely knowing the Word, or even quoting the Word (as in proof texting, or verse spouting) that counts, but the practical application of it to our circumstances that distinguishes us—or as we might say, "the living it out piece." He shapes us dispositionally and through that modifies and transforms the entire world. Little things, like passing the salt, opening a door as well as hiring and firing, all matter.

How do we get comfortable in our own skin, and live peaceably with one another? At peace with one's own soul, and in harmony with others . . . so as to be

² How does this fit with **all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**? First, we must say, no one says Boaz is sinless; they simply account him a worthy man. Second, it may be that this scripture is more respondent to "what is impossible with man is possible with God." Worthiness is a necessary metric in social dealings—it is a judgment that we need to make and we need to do that well!

at home with self, others and God. This is the content behind the word “rest” which Naomi seeks to secure for Ruth and Ruth hopes to secure from Boaz and Boaz seeks to communicate to those in his sphere of influence. Boaz is actively, productively and practically kind. He embodies the *kindness of the Lord* (the *hesed*) which is from everlasting to everlasting: **His steadfast love endures forever.**

Election brings affection. Election is not a heartless, arbitrary doctrine. God loves those He chooses. And when a man, or woman, determines to walk in the integrity of his heart, God applauds the choice; it pleases him. Again, this requires walking prayerfully in the thought forms of Scripture. Psalm 51:7 declares: **Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.** Election is from creation. Also from creation is the need for confession and cleansing: Psalm 57:6-7 also says, **Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.** *But you choose, care, cleanse and prepare your servants! Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.* *Without divine guidance we are helpless, hapless and hopeless which condition is brought on by legalism, hypocrisy and insincerity of heart!* **However,** the saints of the Old Testament were not without recourse! They confessed their sins and sought forgiveness; indeed, they performed blood sacrifices, as commanded, in order to get right with God. Their religion was efficacious, temporarily³. It was a repetitive thing and the superiority of forgiveness by faith in Christ is very evident on this level. So we attain by faith what was formerly maintained by devoted, faithful and sincere works.

Boaz was elect, a son of Abraham, but he had not Christ as we do. Between Psalms 25 and 26 we have a wonderful picture of Old Testament spirituality. Yes, Boaz did not have the psalms to work with either—we do; but these psalms express the dynamics of his faith—the shape of it. And David did not have the temple either (with its refined sacrificial system) and neither of them had the prophets, major, or minor! Regardless, God’s provision is never deficient.

However, if we suppose Boaz to have been rather like David in his Hebraic faith and practice, here is what we might note. First, that in the order of things, purity precedes devotion regardless of whether what we are doing is sacrifice, or praise and worship. Purity comes from cleansing—with hyssop, with godly sorrow, contrition, repentance and request for forgiveness. There is a sequence and a vital connection involved. It is not about external rites, or religious observances, but a sincere, personal and unfeigned desire to be made right with God. This is still the case. We must long to walk in the integrity of our heart. *This does not just happen! It is an operation of grace, a kindness of God, an appropriation of His mercy and a gift of faith.* Spiritual hypocrisy and insincerity are secret, or hidden heart sins which harm us by increasing our alienation from God.

³ It is somewhat like cold medicine which enables us to get our rest so that our bodies can heal themselves. They are helpful but they are not the cure!

The Pentateuch was sufficient for righteousness⁴. God works with us through what we have, not what we don't have. He doesn't demand more bricks and remove the supply of straw! There are no demands made without the means to accomplish them. There is power, help and the spirit to help us get it done—together.

Our need is to cleanse our hands (from evil deeds) and to watch our mouths (that nothing unseemly, vulgar, or vile comes from our lips) and purify our hearts (from evil desires and lusts). It's work. Regular heart-keeping, a form of spiritual hygiene, is conscience enlivening and it is needed daily, Psalm 139:

**23 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
24 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.**

And, then, with thankful dependence and open praise, we go out from the presence of God into his world . . . full of wonder at his love, rejoicing in his kindness and so enter into that "rest" which God has for all those who love him.

We go out, leaving behind the soil of sin, and live the day by grace in victory over Satan, sin and the world. Boaz lived as one loved by God, who loved God and who lived that love out with all he came in contact with. A free man, a godly man. A worthy man living a worthwhile life . . . who could wish for anything more? And we see in him the promise of our Christ whose indwelling presence makes us worthy, too; and whose Spirit empowers us to live lives just as exemplary.

Amen.

⁴ We have a newer, fuller toolbox. It contains improved tools, innovative tools, with which to build our homes. But homes have been built for centuries without them! No pneumatic nailers or powerless tools—imagine! Our state-of-the-art materials are different, too. The point is that with God it gets done!