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July 9th: Ruth 4 & 1 Corinthians 9

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The marriage of Ruth and Boaz. Paul's non-exercise of his freedom.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Ruth, chapter 4. Now Boaz had gone up to the gate and sat down there. And behold the Redeemer, of whom Boaz had spoken, came by. So Boaz said, Turn aside, friend, sit down here.

And he turned aside and sat down. And he took ten men of the elders of the city and said, Sit down here. So they sat down.

Then he said to the Redeemer, Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it and say, Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it.

But if you will not, tell me, that I may know, for there is no one besides you to redeem it, and I come after you. And he said, I will redeem it. Then Boaz said, The day you buy the

field from the hand of Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead, in order to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance.

Then the Redeemer said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it. Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging.

To confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the Redeemer said to Boaz, Buy it for yourself, he drew off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, You are witnesses this day, that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech, and all that belonged to Chilion and Malon.

Also Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Malon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers, and from the gate of his native place. You are witnesses this day. Then all the people who were at the gate and the elders said, We are witnesses.

May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you act worthily in Ephrathah, and be renowned in Bethlehem, and may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bought to Judah, because of the offspring that the Lord will give you by this young woman. So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife, and he went into her, and the Lord gave her conception, and she bore a son.

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 your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him. Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap, and became his nurse.

And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, A son has been born to Naomi. They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the generations of Perez. Perez fathered Hezron. Hezron fathered Ram.

Ram fathered Aminadab. Aminadab fathered Nashon. Nashon fathered Salmon.

Salmon fathered Boaz. Boaz fathered Obed. Obed fathered Jesse.

And Jesse fathered David. Ruth chapter 4, the final chapter of the book of Ruth, begins with a shift in the action. Boaz has seemingly wasted no time, and he's going to settle the arrangements to redeem Ruth.

Boaz goes to the gate and sits down there. The gate was the place where business would

be conducted, where the elders would sit and judicial decisions would be made. While he sits there, it seems that the Redeemer is passing by by chance, and he's called aside by Boaz.

On the surface of the text, it would seem that this is not something that's been arranged beforehand. The Redeemer is off guard and not prepared. Boaz assembles elders of the city.

These would be heads of extended families or tribal or clan leaders, and he gathers 10 of them, which would seem to be an official group. He's taking charge of events. He's been described earlier in chapter 2 as a man of substance, and by his behavior in this incident, he would seem to be a leading figure within the community.

People listen to him and go along with his instructions. He lays out the situation. Naomi has returned from the country of Moab, and she's selling a parcel of land that belonged to a limeleck.

There are a number of possibilities for reading this. Perhaps the point is to buy back the land, land that has already been sold. Perhaps the situation is that Naomi is selling the land because she's impoverished, and the kinsman needs to buy it to save it from being lost to the family.

This might be a similar situation to Jeremiah chapter 32, verses 7 to 15. It's also not entirely certain whether it's the land that's being sold or just its yuzu fruit. However, whichever of these situations it is, the basic situation is that Naomi is impoverished, and she needs someone to intervene.

The responsibility of the kinsman redeemer at this point was very much along the lines of Leviticus chapter 25, verse 35. If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you. The nearer kinsman is prepared to redeem the field, but Boaz raises a problem.

There are a number of ways to read this situation. It seems to be that he presents taking the wife of the dead party as a condition of the transaction. Now how this exactly applies is not clear.

Maybe it's because Naomi will not allow the transaction to go ahead without the person redeeming the land also performing the role of lever at marriage. Alternatively, perhaps it's something that's required in all such cases. Another way to read the situation is that Boaz is saying that he will take Ruth as his wife at the same time as the nearer kinsman buys the field.

This would change the nearer kinsman's mind, because while he was expecting the field to pass into his line of the family, it would return to a limlex line as soon as Ruth's child

came of age. To this point, the discussions have been focused upon the field. But yet that's not really what this is all about.

Boaz's end is to marry Ruth. While Ruth and Naomi have been the focus of the story to this point, we've not even heard about this field. This is new information.

And while the nearer kinsman might think that the field is the real point, it's not. The reader, like Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, knows better. It seems to me that we need to do justice to the secrecy that is emphasised in the preceding part of the story.

A secret plan has been hatched between Boaz, Ruth and Naomi. The question in chapter 3 was who would redeem Ruth and Naomi, not the question of who the redeemer of the field would be. And Boaz presents things in a way that is purposefully ambiguous, something that's not captured in a number of the translations of this text.

What day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi and from Ruth the Moabites, you have bought the wife of the dead to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. Now there's an ambiguity there. The field is bought from the hand of Naomi and Ruth.

But who is the wife of the dead? Who is the dead? Is it Melon? It doesn't seem to be Melon. Rather it seems to be a limeleck, the husband of Naomi. And if the man was also expected to perform the role of lever at marriage for Naomi, a woman who was not going to have any more children, he would ruin his inheritance.

The secret that Boaz, Ruth and Naomi know is that Ruth is prepared to raise up seed for Naomi. Ruth will vicariously act for Naomi in order to raise up seed for a limeleck. The Nerekinsman however knows none of this and so thinking that he will have to take Naomi and marry a barren widow and not be able to raise children of his own, he decides to opt out of the arrangement.

The custom with the sandal is described here and also in Deuteronomy chapter 25 where the law of the lever at marriage is found. In verses 5 to 10 of that chapter, if brothers dwell together and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go into her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her.

And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, my husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel. He will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.

Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him. And if he persists saying, I do not wish to take her, then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders and pull his sandal off his foot and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say,

so shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house.

And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, the house of him who had his sandal pulled off. Callum Carmichael has suggested that this is a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan in Genesis chapter 38 verses 7 to 10. But Ur, Judas firstborn was wicked in the sight of the Lord and the Lord put him to death.

Then Judas said to Onan, go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her and raise up offspring for your brother. But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his. So whenever he went into his brother's wife, he would waste the semen on the ground so as not to give offspring to his brother.

And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord and he put him to death also. Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his. So he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground.

The motive was greed. He didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself. The removal of the sandal from the foot then corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse.

Elsewhere in scripture, the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals. The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal. She then spits in his face and that corresponds with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action.

The person who failed to perform the duty of the leveret then receives a dishonorable name for his house. However, here in Ruth, the removal of the sandal is presented more as the settling of a transaction. It is not presented as a shaming ritual as it is in the book of Deuteronomy.

At this point, Boaz reveals his cards. The elders at the gate are the witnesses that he has bought from the hand of Naomi all of Elimelech's property and also all the property of Cilion and Melon. However, the real surprise is that he has acquired Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Melon.

She is going to be the one by which the name of the dead will be raised up. This was why secrecy was so important in the episode on the threshing floor. The people and the elders at the gate declare a blessing upon Ruth who is coming into Boaz's house, expressing their desire that she be like Rachel and Leah, raising up and building the house of Israel.

And very surprisingly, they also mention the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah. Boaz is of course a descendant of Perez. But the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38 is a strange one.

It's a one that begins with the death of two sons and the gradual descent of a whole

family into death. In that story, Tamar intervenes and raises up Seed. Seed raised up through highly irregular relationship with her father-in-law.

The parallels between Tamar and Judah and the incident of the preceding chapter on the threshing floor between Ruth and Boaz should not escape us, nor should the broader parallel. Ruth, like Tamar, is one who's going to raise up a house that has descended into death and is going to bring new life. As Tamar took the initiative, so Ruth takes the initiative.

And in the story of Ruth and Boaz, two stories from the book of Genesis join paths. The story of the daughters of Lot and the story of Judah and Tamar. Ruth is a descendant of the Moabites who were conceived in the irregular relationship between Lot and his daughters.

And Boaz is a descendant of Perez who was conceived in the similarly irregular relationship between Judah and Tamar. Two broken histories are being healed here. The book began with the story of a man, Elimelech, and his two sons, Melon and Kilion.

They die almost straight away. By the end of the book, the spotlight is almost completely upon Ruth and Naomi. There's a focus upon Ruth in the blessing.

There's a focus upon Naomi in the way that the women speak to her. In the way that Obed is presented as her redeemer, Ruth is praised as her daughter-in-law. There is also a more general focus upon the women as the women name the child.

The Lord gives conception to Ruth. The Lord's hand has not been prominently seen throughout much of this story, but in small twists of chance and in the way that he has inspired certain people to particular actions, we can see God's agency throughout. In the faithful actions of a foreign woman, a dead household has been raised up and new life has been brought.

New life that will eventually lead to the birth of David. Obed is presented as the son that is the redeemer of Naomi, as Naomi's son. Ruth, in her loyalty to Naomi, bore a son for her in order to redeem the name of Elimelech, Naomi's dead husband.

By ending this story with an emphasis upon David and upon Perez, we are being taught that in the heroism of Ruth and in characters like Tamar, dead houses can be raised up. That the house of David depends upon divine intervention and God's grace in preventing it from falling into death. On a number of occasions in its prehistory, David's house was almost wiped out and it was only by the hand of divine providence that it was saved.

A question to consider, as the curtain closes on the narrative of the book of Ruth, the spotlight rests upon the character of Naomi. We read the story of Ruth, not inappropriately, as the story of Ruth. What things would come to greater focus if we read it as the story of Naomi? 1 Corinthians chapter 9. Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?

Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

This is my defence to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop.

If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.

For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting. For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting, for necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel, for if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.

What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.

To those under the law I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law, not being outside the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak.

I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Starting 1 Corinthians chapter 9, we seem to be engaging in a strange digression from Paul's argument. Paul seems to be moving into a completely unrelated subject. One moment he's talking about idol food, the next he's talking about his rights as an apostle.

Perhaps, however, we don't notice this shift. We may be so used to breaking Paul up into verses and chapters that we don't think about the larger flow of his arguments, but it does matter at points like this. Paul has not left his point behind.

He's approaching it indirectly through his own experience, and the point of this chapter is to raise a secondary issue, the question of his rights and support as an apostle, and then using that to address a primary issue. The issue of idol food is still very much the issue here, it's the point, and it will remain the issue right through the whole of chapter 10. The main point of this chapter is not to defend Paul, but to exhort the Corinthians to learn from Paul's practice in regard to financial support and to bring that to bear upon their relation to the issue of idol food.

The previous chapter had ended with a striking claim, therefore if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. And one can imagine people reacting against this claim. Our reaction is against this claim.

Why should our rights be held hostage by other people in such a manner? The natural response then is to insist upon our freedom, our right to eat what we want, and not to compromise that for anyone else, our rights are our rights. Paul lists at this point a number of his credentials as an apostle. He's seen the risen Christ, he's founded the Corinthian church, and the Corinthians should be the first to recognise his apostolic claim, since they are the direct beneficiaries of his ministry.

Paul, of all people, as an apostle, should be free, and he makes a deft rhetorical move here. Does he not have the right to eat and drink as a free apostle? This relates what he's saying to the argument of chapter 8, but also relates to the question that he raises in this chapter about his support in his ministry. He has to make his living, he has to eat and drink, and he needs the money to do so.

Behind Paul's use of rights language here is verse 9 of the preceding chapter. But take care this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. The issue in the preceding chapter was the Corinthians' rights, and now Paul talks about his own rights, and how he has exercised those rights in his dealings with them.

The other apostles are supported in a way that enables them to take wives with them.

Paul is unmarried, and has to work for his own support, like Barnabas. He presents a series of analogies that show the strangeness of this situation.

It's like the soldier fighting on his own expense, or the vineyard planter who can't taste the fruit of his vineyard, or the shepherd that cannot enjoy the milk of the flock. Beyond these analogies, the law itself presents the principle of not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain, and Paul makes clear here that this is a symbolic commandment. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, it's related to the right of the man performing the levirate marriage to enjoy the use of his dead brother's property while he is raising up seed for him.

It's also connected with those working in the temple, and maybe we should see some connection here. Those working in the temple were working on a site that had been built upon the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, and the priests of course were symbolically connected with oxen in the sacrifices. They were the oxen working on the threshing floor, and they were entitled to eat of the sacrifices that were offered there.

As they prepared the grain of God's people for the Lord, they were entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour. And it would seem that this same logic would apply to Paul. In his ministry, he has the right to enjoy the benefits of his work.

He should be able to be funded or supported by his labours as a missionary. However, in dealing with the Corinthians, Paul did not exert this. In other cases, he did take funding, but not with them.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 11, verses 7 to 9, Paul could be supported in a number of different ways. They could charge fees. Certain philosophers would go around and charge fees for their speeches.

Others would be supported by a wealthy patron. Which had problems, because they would be beholden to that person, and possibly end up being compromised in their ability to tell the truth. A third type of philosopher went around begging, supporting themselves by pestering the general population for funds.

There was however a fourth option, and Paul took this one when dealing with the Corinthians. This was to support oneself. In Acts chapter 18, verses 1 to 3 we read, After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.

And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked, for they were tent makers by trade. Paul's point in taking this approach is not to place a burden on the Corinthians. And this passage isn't placing pressure on the Corinthians to offer such support.

He's not blaming them at this point. He's not saying that they need to mend their ways and start to give him money. Indeed, Paul goes on to make the most startling of claims.

He said he would rather die than be deprived of his boast. What is his boast? It's his stewardship of the Gospel. He is not a mercenary.

He's a man with a God-given vocation. And in declaring the Gospel free of charge, as a servant of Christ, he displays the Gospel in his actions. Christ himself didn't exert his prerogatives, but he laid them aside to go to the cross.

Paul has become a servant to all in order to win as many as possible. He's not in it for himself. He's not in it to make a profit.

He's in it as a servant. He becomes like the Jews to win the Jews. He becomes like those under the law to win those under the law.

He becomes like those outside of the law to win them, and like the weak to win them. He becomes like the Jews. It's a strange thing to say, because Paul himself is a Jew.

However, he has ceased to be what he once was. He is no longer defined by his old way of life. And so when he relates to the Jews as a Jew, he is stepping back into an old form of life that he is no longer defined by.

He no longer sees himself primarily as someone of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is now a man in Christ. It is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him.

He becomes like those under the law. He's no longer under the law in the sense that he once was, but if it makes it easier to win people for Christ who are under the law, he will act as one under the law. He also becomes like those outside of the law, while clarifying that he is still under the law of Christ.

This is a new law he lives in terms of, the law set by Christ's own pattern and example. Finally, he becomes like the weak, and in this he presents an example to the strong in Corinth. He wants to protect the weak.

He wants to win them for the gospel. And this is in great contrast to those who are prepared to destroy them for the sake of their knowledge, a knowledge that puffs up and does not build up. And all of this is for the sake of the gospel.

Paul is a steward of the gospel, and he wants to be faithful in his stewardship. He concludes by exhorting the Corinthians to see themselves like athletes. Athletes control and limit themselves in order to win a prize.

And the Christians should be the same. The strong should be like athletes. They follow Paul's example.

They discipline themselves for the sake of the goal that really matters. It's the growth of the kingdom, and being faithful to the stewardship of the gospel that's committed to us. And if that requires that we do not exert our rights, then we do not exert our rights.

A question to consider. How does Paul's teaching in this chapter challenge our notions of freedom and rights?