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July 8th: Ruth 3 & 1 Corinthians 8

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Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor. Idol food and the weaker brother.

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

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Transcript

Ruth chapter 3. Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. Wash, therefore, and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak, and go down to the threshing-floor. But do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.

But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do. And she replied, All that you say I will do.

So she went down to the threshing-floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down.

At midnight the man was startled and turned over. And behold, a woman lay at his feet. He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant.

Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask. For all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman.

And now it is true that I am a redeemer, yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. Remain to-night, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good, let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.

So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor. And he said, Bring the garment you are wearing, and hold it out.

So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her. Then she went into the city. And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, How did you fare, my daughter? Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, These six measures of barley he gave to me.

For he said to me, You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law. She replied, Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out. For the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.

In Ruth chapter 3, Naomi has a plan and instructs Ruth in what she should do. She informs Ruth that Boaz is a relative, someone who can play the part of a near kinsman, someone who could redeem the lost property, and perhaps also raise up seed for the dead husband. Boaz is currently winnowing on the threshing-floor, and Ruth is instructed to dress up, presenting herself as available for marriage.

To this point she has probably been wearing work clothes or widow's garments, and now she is going to dress as someone who is available for marriage. It wasn't typical for a woman to propose. Ruth is here communicating that she is available, and also how Boaz can act in a way that makes a difference in Naomi's situation.

In Boaz's mind at this point, he presumably thinks that to raise up seed for the dead Elimelech, the former husband of Naomi, he would have to marry Naomi, but Naomi is presumably past child-bearing age at this point. Boaz can't redeem Naomi without jeopardising his own inheritance then, and also there is a nearer kinsman. Most of what he has been able to do he has done though, by providing grain and making it easy for Ruth to glean.

Ruth comes to Boaz secretly by night, it's important that she does this, because he needs to be let in to Ruth and Naomi's plan, which, if it were more widely known, might not be effective. Boaz eats and drinks and becomes merry, and then he goes down to lie at the end of the heap of grain. He's a man who's enjoying plenty, he has all that he needs to eat and drink, and he has a great pile of grain that he owns.

Ruth comes and uncovers his feet and lies down. This is a strange thing to do, and it seems to be significant in various ways. However, even before we speculate about some of the greater symbolic meanings, it would wake him up when his feet got cold, which seems to have happened at midnight, and then he sees Ruth lying there.

This strange incident might remind us of the story of Ruth's ancestress. Moab is born as the daughter of Lot uncovers him at night after he's drunk, and lies with him. And the firstborn said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come into us after the manner of all the earth.

Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father. So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father.

He did not know when she lay down, or when she arose. The next day the firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine to-night also, then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.

So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him. And he did not know when she lay down, or when she arose.

Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day.

The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-Ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. In Genesis chapter 19 verses 31 to 38, there are similarities to observe between these stories.

On the surface of things Ruth seems to be behaving very much like her ancestress. Some readers might also see associations between this story and the Moabites that tempted Israel to sexual sin in the book of Numbers. Yet the similarities here invite us to juxtapose the two stories, to see the differences between them, to see that Ruth, although she is behaving on the surface like her ancestress, is doing something very different.

A further connection we can notice is with the law of the Leveret in Deuteronomy chapter 25. That law is introduced by a strange symbolic commandment. You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.

Boaz is being called to play the role of the Leveret here. And Ruth goes to meet him at the place where the oxen would tread out the grain. She uncovers his feet and then lies at his feet, as if she was the one that he was treading out.

She is, I believe, presenting him with a symbolic representation of the role that she is calling him to play. As the ox trod out the grain on the threshing floor, so Boaz was to tread out the grain by raising up seed for the dead man through sexual relations with Ruth. There are sexual connotations in the story of course.

We've already seen some of those connotations in the story of Lot's daughters. We can also see a similar story in the uncovering of Noah after he drinks of the vineyard. The language of uncovering or covering feet can be euphemistic elsewhere in scripture.

In Deuteronomy chapter 28 verse 57, in Isaiah chapter 7 verse 20, and Ezekiel chapter 16 verse 25, feet can seemingly refer to genitalia. And the language of covering feet is used elsewhere when people such as Eglon and Saul are supposedly relieving themselves. And of course in terms of the symbolic commandment of the oxen treading out the grain, the treading out of the oxen, the feet of the oxen, are symbolically associated with the sexual relations of the kinsman redeemer.

Now it should be clear that Ruth does not actually have sexual relations with Boaz or do anything untoward here, but she is symbolically performing something that has sexual connotations and bringing to mind a number of earlier events in which sexual relations or some other event of sexual import occurred. The entire relationship between Ruth and Boaz to this point we should bear in mind has been associated with themes of harvest and with grain. Ruth first comes to Boaz at the time of harvest and fertility.

Boaz himself here is lying at the end of the heap of grain. And at the conclusion of the scene Boaz gives Ruth six heifers of barley. The visual imagery here should be worth noting.

Boaz pours his seed into Ruth's cloak, which she presumably carries in front of her in a manner similar to that of a woman with a child. And this is all occurring at the time of harvest. It's suggesting more seed and harvest to come.

A heap of grain brings to mind abundance and sustenance, fertility and vitality. In Song of Solomon chapter 7 verse 2 the waist of the Shulamite woman is compared to a heap of wheat set about with lilies. All of this symbolism then should prime us for what's about to happen.

And there's another thing to notice about the symbolism here. In the preceding chapter Boaz had said to Ruth in verse 12, Here in order to uncover Boaz's feet Ruth lifts up the wings of his garment and invites him to spread his wings over her. Boaz recognized in the preceding chapter that Ruth had come to take shelter under the Lord's wings and

now Ruth invites him to take her under his wings and that as she comes under his wings she might more fully come under the wings of the Lord.

He had wished a blessing upon her there, the Lord repay you for what you have done and a full reward be given you. And now he blesses her, recognizing that the kindness that she has done in this chapter is far exceeding the one that she did even in the preceding chapters. In the preceding chapters she had accompanied Naomi back to the land of Israel and now she has done something even more.

Ruth was a free woman, she was free to marry whomever she wanted. She could have married someone who was younger but she chose Boaz. Why Boaz? Because Boaz was a man in the position to redeem Naomi.

Boaz recognizes that what Ruth is doing here is not merely for her own sake, rather it's for the sake of Naomi. It is continuing and extending her bond of loyalty to Naomi. Boaz describes her as a worthy woman.

He himself has been described as a worthy man earlier in the book. They fit together very well. Yet he points out that there is a nearer redeemer, someone who is a closer relative who could perform the role of the redeemer instead of him.

Boaz however commits himself to get things moving, to redeem her if the nearer kinsman would not. However Boaz is privy to information that the other redeemer would not be, namely that Ruth is so associated with her mother-in-law that she will raise up seed for her. The nearer kinsman would presume that he had to marry Naomi in order to raise up seed, but Boaz knows that he can marry Ruth in order to do so.

In Deuteronomy chapter 25 the law of the leveret comes at the beginning of the laws associated with the tenth commandment, you shall not covet. Performing the leveret was a sort of paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbor's possessions or their station in life. It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name.

And in Ruth we have a perfect demonstration of what this looks like. The kindness of Ruth is the fulfillment of the tenth commandment. She is lovingly putting the interests of her mother-in-law above her own.

A question to consider. Can you see any associations between the story of Judah and Hamar in chapter 38 of Genesis and the story of Ruth and Boaz in this chapter? 1 Corinthians chapter 8. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.

If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one.

For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. Thus sinning against your brothers, and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

1 Corinthians chapter 8 turns to a new issue, food associated with pagan deities or idol meat. There are various ways in which food could be entangled with pagan deities. Sometimes it would be meat in the marketplace that would have come from pagan sacrifices.

Meat could also be eaten in cultic meals, or in meals otherwise associated with pagan temples and their gods. In some such cases, there might be the sense of eating in the presence of the deity, and wealthy Corinthians would likely have been invited to meals in dining places associated with temples. This was an issue in the early church, we see it in Acts chapter 15 verses 19-20 and 28-29.

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.

Farewell. And then Revelation chapter 2 verse 20. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality, and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

All of us possess knowledge, seems to be a statement of the Corinthians, and Paul here provisionally presents this viewpoint as if he agreed with it for his rhetorical purposes before going on to subvert it. We should likely also read knowledge here as if in scare

quotes, as Paul's following statements seem to support. The Corinthians' supposed knowledge probably had a lot to do with their supposed super-spirituality.

They likely believe that they can eat food associated with pagan deities with no problem whatsoever, believing that the pagan deities are not real, and that it is just meat. They might even be purposefully eating pagan meat to make the point, to display their knowledge. Yet such knowledge merely puffs people up.

It makes them feel self-important and superior. Love, however, builds up. It has substance and genuineness to it.

Love, in contrast to such knowledge, is concerned for the effects of our actions upon others, upon weaker brethren. The Corinthians' knowledge is selfish, individualistic, and self-important. But love seeks the good of the community.

And those who think that they have achieved this sort of knowledge haven't yet come to know as they ought to know. True knowledge is achieved in the way of love. The Corinthians might regard their triumphalistic knowledge as a spiritual gift, but Paul contrasts it with a coming to know that is characterised by growth in love, which is a more humble and a humbling process.

Anthony Thistleton suggests that we should follow some manuscripts which exclude the reference to God in verse 3, and that would read, If anyone loves, he has experienced true knowing. The alternative, the more common reading, again privileges love, as something directed to God, and as something that is related to the priority of God's act of knowing, rather than our own. Similar expressions of the priority of God's knowing over ours can be found in places like 1 Corinthians 13, verse 12.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. And then in Galatians chapter 4, verse 9. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.

Our knowledge of God then proceeds from and responds to his prior loving knowledge of us. Not only does Christianity have a way of wisdom, a way that's associated with Christ and the mindset of the cross, it also has a way of knowing. A way of knowing that's characterized by love.

True knowledge is arrived at through the act of love, and a so-called knowledge that is not loving will not produce any sort of true knowing. Paul goes on to affirm, at least in principle, the Corinthians' knowledge that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one. He shares these convictions, but he goes on to show how they play out differently in his thinking, than they do in the Corinthians.

For even if, for the sake of argument, there are many gods in heaven and earth, just as there are many for which the status of gods or lords are claimed, for the Christian there

is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. And there is an underlying question here. Are the gods of the idols real or only imagined? And Paul's point might seem to align with the sort of statements that we find in Isaiah, where idols and their makers are ridiculed as powerless to save and vain, as if they were nothing.

However, elsewhere in scripture one might get the impression that there really are false gods at work in the world. Paul returns to this issue in chapter 10 verses 19 to 21, where his position becomes clearer. What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God.

I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

The false gods are vain, and they are not what they claim to be, and God has proven his actual power over their empty boasts. However, this does not mean that powerful demonic forces aren't at work in the world. The weak brothers might ascribe far too much power to these demonic forces and these false gods, and the strong far too little.

The strong rightly recognize their vanity and their emptiness, but the weak recognize their power. Both are only seeing part of the picture though, and Paul wants to emphasize both aspects. In verse 6, Paul quotes and elaborates the fundamental claim of the Jewish faith, the Shema.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. However, Paul has taken this statement and has inserted Christ into this fundamental confession. The term God relates to the Father, and the term Lord to Jesus Christ, but they are held together in indivisible unity.

There's one God, but the identity of this one God includes both Christ and the Father. The Father and Jesus Christ are, however, distinguished by the prepositions applied to them. All things are from and for the Father, and all things are through Christ.

This helps us to understand the Trinity in part, how the triune persons can be one and their actions inseparable. It is not that the triune persons divide the work out between them, like a division of labor. Rather, every single act of God is done by all of God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

Every act of God is from the Father, every act of God is through the Son, every act of God is in the Spirit. Each of the divine persons is the author of every work of God in its entirety, and the one undivided God is active in every single one of the divine works. We're seeing a very sophisticated theology emerging here.

For Paul's argument, the fact that all things are from the Father and through Christ challenges the idea that there is any such thing, or could be any such thing, as an

alternative deity with autonomous power to exert in the world. Whatever the false gods might be, whatever the idols that people worship, they are of an utterly different order of reality than the one true God. The one true God is the creator and sustainer of all things, and they are merely dependent creatures.

The problem for many of the weak, who presumably had lower social standing, was that they had former associations with idols. They see idol food as offered to a real false deity. They may want to go along with the strong, who presumably had higher social standing, that's part of what the strength means, and a sense of knowledge.

They might have invited them to come along to some of these feasts, but they are compromised in their self-awareness, and as they go against their consciences, they end up being wounded in their faith and going astray. Paul makes clear that neither eating nor refraining from eating advantages someone before God. Exerting a supposed right to eat food is not going to make you better off before God, nor is abstaining.

He warns against the strong's supposed right to choose, and the way in which that supposed liberty could actually cause the weak to stumble. It might be that the strong wanted to encourage the weak into exerting supposed knowledge in eating food sacrificed to idols. However, the weak would end up eating the food while feeling the cultic force of what was taking place.

They would feel confused and be wounded in their conscience as a result, feeling that they were actually showing some sort of homage to the false deities. It is one thing to believe that the food of the marketplace isn't defiled by virtue of weaker supposed associations with idols. It is another to aggressively assert one's knowledge in a manner unmindful of and unloving towards brothers and sisters who could be wounded by it, and this wounding of conscience together with the confusion that could be caused would actually lead to weaker brothers' faith even being shipwrecked in some way.

While the strong might be seeking to build the weak into the same confidence that they enjoyed, the effect was actually destructive, and what's worse, Christ died for the weaker brother, whose spiritual well-being the strong have treated with such carelessness. The result is that they are sinning against Christ. Paul's approach then is against the proud individualism that would ride roughshod over others' weak consciences for the sake of their higher knowledge.

He would rather not exert freedoms that he genuinely possessed for the sake of the well-being of the weaker brother. Love is prioritised over proud knowledge. A question to consider, what are some of the broader implications of the fact that the way of true knowledge is through love?