

SUNDAY SERVICE 28/06/2020

Ruth Chapter 4 by Rev. Martin Beukes

Call to Worship from *The Act of Prayer* by John Birch

As we gather for worship, let us remember we are not an isolated community of believers in this place, but the family of God gathered together from every corner of this world in one great offering of praise. Together with your children, Lord, wherever they might be, we bring you our offering of praise, the burdens on our hearts, and, as we feed on your word, the service of our lives as change-makers in your beautiful but fragile world. Amen

Hymn StF 83 / H&P 13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyRIVbdsi4c>

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| 1 Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;
to his feet thy tribute bring.
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who like thee his praise should sing?
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King! | 3 Father-like, he tends and spares us;
well our feeble frame he knows;
in his hands he gently bears us,
rescues us from all our foes.
Praise him! Praise him!
Widely as his mercy flows. |
| 2 Praise him for his grace and favour
to his people in distress;
praise him, still the same for ever,
slow to chide, and swift to bless.
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in his faithfulness. | 4 Angels in the height, adore him;
ye behold him face to face;
sun and moon, bow down before him,
dwellers all in time and space.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise with us the God of grace! |

Confessions from *Methodist Worship* p174

Gracious and holy God, we confess that we have sinned against you and against our neighbour. Your Spirit gives light, but we have preferred darkness; your Spirit gives wisdom, but we have been foolish; your spirit gives power, but we have trusted in our own strength. For the sake of Jesus your Son, forgive our sins, and enable us by your Spirit to serve you in Joyful obedience, to the glory of your name. Amen. Hear the words that Jesus spoke so many times on the road, "Your sin is forgiven." Amen.

Read Ruth chapter 4

Sermon

For the last weeks we have looked at the difficulties with the text, and how it challenges our failing as humanity. Today I want to read it with the different eyes. What if the main characters are acting out of their own motivations? What if God is acting, nudging each of them towards redemption? What if their motivations are more than a little bit God coloured?

Ruth is a hard tale that starts with death and ends with grace, and so shall I. What makes someone feel worthless? Why do so many people in the world struggle with a sense of worthlessness? I have known a lot of people who could not honestly sing the words "Praise my

soul the king of heaven" at times in their lives. Ruth and Naomi certainly would not have been able to. Boaz likely would not either. What about you?

Our lives are filled with people we have met, loved, lived with, cared for, failed, and even hated, who felt worthless and so act accordingly. Doing terrible things out of their pain. Every single one of us has done the same at some point - even if we don't recognise it. Even scripture is full of people who felt worthless: they are sold into slavery, raped, used, discarded, hunted, and murdered.

It is a terrible part of life on earth that people feel worthless sometimes; and a worse fact that people are stripped of their worth by circumstances and expectations most often beyond their control; and an even worse fact that sometimes we are complicit in that stripping of all worth, even when we don't know or have convinced ourselves otherwise.

I had a colleague who achieved more than most would ever believe possible. He held one of the highest possible positions in the Methodist Church of southern Africa; he was awarded one of the highest National Honours for working for peace before and after the fall of apartheid, including literally saving lives; he was awarded an honorary doctorate for mediating a feud between two Mississippi state senators that was leading to unrest; his church feeding scheme was one of the first aid organisations on site when hurricane Katrina hit; and he was appointed to dream up and establish a new institution to train and form Methodist Ministers for southern Africa. He had a wonderful family, the esteem of others, and not yet even 60. And he died one day, in his garage, at his own hand. Our pain and the pressures of everyday things can crush us!

Naomi's story is one of bitterness. With her husband she has to leave her home and her people to go another country and people who don't hold the same values and expectations as her, because they are desperate and hungry. While there she builds a good life, her sons grow and marry two wonderful girls who love her dearly. But then they die, one by one, and she finds herself on the road back to her hometown, again desperate, again facing starvation, and she renames herself Bitterness because God had dealt bitterly with her. She has little regard for herself because she feels like God has little regard for her. She even tries to turn away her two loving daughter-in-laws who have travelled to this point with her by saying, "I can't have another son to be your husband, why waste your time with me, rather go find a new husband."

Ruth, the ever-loyal and ever-loving daughter-in-law travels with Naomi to a country that she does not know. She sets about gleaning to get food and she dutifully picks the barley at the edges of the fields where the grass and weeds meet the grain. It is hard work, and it is dangerous work. The story implies that it is not uncommon for a woman gleaning in the fields to be raped. But her other option is probably to become a prostitute, so she takes her chances and holds on to the last scrap of self-regard she has. At least she is worth something if she can gather food for her mother-in-law. And at least it's a little easier when the rich farmer's men drop a lot of what they reap. He even invites her to lunch with the servant and she carefully keeps some for Naomi. She has no idea why he notices her or cares, but she has a full belly tonight.

Then there is a rich old farmer, Boaz. We know he is wealthy because he has servants reaping the harvest and not his own family. Which may also be a clue that we are expected to presume he has no family. For an Israelite, family is everything. We also know he is generous and can spare plenty of grain for the pretty young woman gleaning in his fields. So, life can't be that bad. His men even regard him enough that when he tells them to treat her well and not abuse her, they listen. But all he really has going for him is threshing his barley, eating and drinking too much, and falling asleep on the hay pile next to his barley.

In the story and today, people lose their self-regard and sometimes even their sense of worth in their own eyes and those the community. Worse than that some are born with less regard and worth because of their race, gender, caste, language, parents failings towards them or themselves, or even because of the place in the world where they were born. The human story is one were some are worth less than others in some people's eyes, or their own, and this is most often a story of death.

We regard some and treat others as worthless because of we expect certain things and fail to see the human beings on the other side of our expectations. The words of the old him come to mind "our redeeming Lord...bids us, each to each restored" because Ruth is after all a redemption story...

Hymn StF 608 / H&P 753 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPh-a8Cb5t8>

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| 1 | All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face. | 4 | E'en now we think and speak the same,
and cordially agree;
concentred all, through Jesu's name,
in perfect harmony. |
| 2 | He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope
we hand in hand go on. | 5 | We all partake the joy of one,
the common peace we feel,
a peace to sensual minds unknown,
a joy unspeakable. |
| 3 | The gift which he on one bestows,
we all delight to prove;
the grace through every vessel flows,
in purest streams of love. | 6 | And if our fellowship below
in Jesus be so sweet,
what heights of rapture shall we know
when round his throne we meet! |

So, I want to wrap up our exploration of Ruth by speaking about self-regard. Self-regard is not the same as self-esteem. Self-esteem is something pop-psychologists and TV talk show host try to tell us "If we have high self-esteem, we will achieve great things." And yet any sort of esteem is something which is fragile and even damaging when dented or stroked. Many have an overly developed or overly high esteem for themselves, we just need to look at some people with power and celebrity who have an extremely high esteem for themselves yet little to no substance!

Self-regard is also not about self-worth because real loss of worth and especially total loss of worth is a place of absolute desolation where any answer to the pain seems good enough. A complete loss of self-worth is normally preceded by anger, burnout, and depression. Many have little worth, because it has been taken from them by others but no-one can take our self-regard. And so, a good way to think about self-regard is to remember that we sign letters "Kind Regards," to show the recipient our respect, care, and even love.

Now, if I were to ask, how do you regard yourself? It is a difficult question. Many of us regard ourselves quite poorly. We don't respect, care for, and love ourselves well. When we have high regard for someone or something, we treat it well, we love it, we nurture it, we push it to be better, and we value its gift to the world.

Ruth is a very significant book, because like the other novella in Scripture about an endangered woman needing God's gracious intervention, it hardly mentions God at all. It is significant that the main characters do not have a very high regard for themselves. But, like Esther, it is a story of God's high regard for them and so God's redeeming work in their lives.

Boaz: We saw before that he is likely a rich old farmer without a family and we wonder if he winnowed the barley each year in awe at his wealth and "blessing from God" and then drank away the pain of his loneliness. But then a pretty young woman that he was kind to in the fields one day falls in love with him in the hay next to his barley one night. "Thank you for not running after the pretty boys." he whispers in her ear. He falls for her, so hard that he very slyly misleads the other Guardian-Redeemer telling him that he needs to marry Ruth if he redeems Naomi's property because Boaz wants to marry her! And so, God's redeeming love to him was Ruth's love to him which redeemed his heart.

Ruth: We saw before that she has lost everything and all her security. She has no land or husband to offer the security of a home or regular meal. I wonder how often she lay cold and hungry at night remembering the security of life in Moab with Mahlon, when she had hope and a good simple life. One night she gets all dolled up and sneaks into the harvest party of the kindly farmer who made her feel seen and gave her plenty food, and she lies down beside him in the hay. And so, God's redeeming love to her is a kind man, and a square meal, and the promise of a safe life.

Naomi: Bitterness herself, she has lost her husband, two sons, her home, even her dignity because everyone would think her cursed by God with so much suffering in her life. And nothing can bring back what she has lost. Yet she has one small blessing from God left, a daughter-in-law who wouldn't leave when Naomi couldn't give her a son and who even kept half of her gift of lunch for Naomi. And so, God's redeeming love to her is Ruth, and the bouncing baby boy her loyal daughter-in-law and her kindly cousin give her to love.

For each of them, their redemption is discovering that God still regards them, and they regard each, and that God makes them whole again, together. That is redemption, and that is grace: even when life completely sucks God signs letters to us "Kind Regards" and we would understand if we just read the letter together.

And so, the story ends with grace, and I sign my letters “Grace,” because of a colleague who knew the grace of Jesus but not of himself; because of a foreign girl who knew the gracious regard of an old farmer and a farmer who knew the gracious regard of a pretty young woman; and because of the grace of an old women who regained the regard of the village and herself with God’s gift of a son; and because of the great-great-great-great-times-twenty-eight grand Son who was Grace incarnate, come to be a living reminder of God’s regard for us, even when the community regards us as less, even when our self-regard has failed us.

Take 10 minutes to reflect in groups or listen quietly to what God may be saying to you.

Prayer from *The Act of Prayer* by John Birch

It is a truth worth sharing, Lord, that there is nothing we can say or do that will make you love us more, and nothing we can say or do that will make you love us less, for in your eyes we are all your children, equally precious in your sight. Such love, so undeserved, poured out and overflowing, so unlike the love that we so often show, demands a response, not only in our prayer but in the thanksgiving offering of our daily lives. Amen

Prayers for our church and the world take some time to pray for the state of the world, the state of people’s hearts, and that people would know the redeeming love of God in the followers of Jesus.

If you are leading a service on Zoom, or if you are in a room with others, ask “Is there anything you want to give thanks to God for, or anything you want toas the community’s prayers for?” and then pray about those thing.

Hymn StF443 / H&P 691 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4X2B_LCbx4

1. Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
tender and true;
out of the heart of the Father above,
streaming to me and to you:
wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.

2. Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
joyfully came;
came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
sharing their sorrow and shame;
seeking the lost,
saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

3. Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
why do they roam?

Love only waits to forgive and forget;
home, weary wanderer, home!

Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above

4. Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
come and abide,

lifting my life, till it rises above
envy and falsehood and pride;

seeking to be

lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

Blessing an old friend’s translation of Numbers 6:24-6

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord turn his face toward you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift a smile over your life and give you peace. Amen.