

If it’s true that “behind every great man is a great woman,” then it seems reasonable to conclude that the greater the great man the greater the great woman. And the last word, literally the last word of Ruth reveals just how great Ruth and Naomi are; the last word is Israel’s greatest man – David. The last word points us to God’s last word, the Son of David, Jesus Christ.

We’ve come a long way from the dark days that began Ruth’s story; desperate days spent fleeing famine, fearing the worst, and discovering that while there is no way out of sorrow and suffering, there is a way through; that way is the great virtue of the Old Testament, the virtue that Ruth exemplifies better than anyone other than Jesus –, חסד (hesed) “compassion,” “loving kindness,” “the discipline of generosity that binds Israelites to one another and to God. [Ruth teaches us that] “acts of חסד (hesed) open up the future God intends.”¹

Today, we have the opportunity to demonstrate חסד (hesed) ourselves. We can practice “the discipline of generosity” by making a pledge for 2013. We offer our “widow’s mite” and commit ourselves to God and to one another. Together, we will receive and offer a widow’s abundance.

“Matchmaker, Matchmaker”

Naomi is a Jewish mother, and she demonstrates חסד (hesed) by being a Jewish mother.

Matchmaker, Matchmaker,
 Make me a match,
 Find me a find,
 catch me a catch
 Matchmaker, Matchmaker
 Look through your book,
 And make me a perfect match.²

Ruth is a widow; she’s in mourning, but enough is enough. *Ruth 3:1 (NRSV)* “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.

¹ Ellen F. Davis, ““All That You Say, I Will Do”: A Sermon on the Book of Ruth,” in *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs*, Eds. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stuhlburg. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 5.

² “Matchmaker.” *Fiddler on the Roof*. Jerry Bock. Sheldon Harnick. Joseph Stein.

She’s seen how Boaz looks at Ruth; she’s seen how Ruth looks at Boaz. They are both behaving honorably. Ruth is a widow, and she is observing the prescribed period of mourning for her late husband; she’s dressing in black; she isn’t wearing make-up or perfume. And Boaz is respecting Ruth’s status as a widow; he’s keeping his distance.

They are both modeling הִסֵּד (hesed), but enough is enough! Someone has to give these two permission to let the past be the past and to step out into the future. They’re stuck in the was, and it’s time to embrace the now. Someone has to get things moving; someone like a Jewish mother, like Naomi.

She issues orders like a contestant on “Iron Chef.” “Wash up. Anoint yourself with perfumed oil. Put on your best outfit. Wait until Boaz has had dinner. Watch where he goes to sleep. Once he does, go there and uncover his feet. He’ll wake up. Once he does, he’ll tell you what to do.”

To be clear: Naomi is asking Ruth to risk everything! She is a Moabite in the land of Judah. She’s a foreigner; she’s one of “them.” She is vulnerable, and Naomi is asking her to make herself even more vulnerable. Ruth’s only protection is her social status as a widow, and Naomi is telling her to give that up. And Ruth’s הִסֵּד (hesed) takes the risk: *Ruth 3:5 (NRSV)* “*All that you tell me I will do.*”

Ruth’s הִסֵּד (hesed) makes the future possible. Our הִסֵּד (hesed) makes the future possible.

One writer put it this way: “This story ... gives us hope and direction for ourselves and hope also for something beyond our own lives. The story gives hope, because it shows ordinary people helping each other grow through and beyond personal tragedy. And what opens up, through acts of generosity and mutual regard, is something far beyond their own small sphere, beyond what they could know or imagine.... After the spectacular failures of the days of the judges [and the spectacular failures today] this itself is amazing: God still intends a future for Israel. [God still intends a future for us!] The full story of that future isn’t yet known to any of us, even now. [We’ve read enough and lived enough] to know that what lies beyond their story is an imperfect future, marked by sin and much suffering and punishment for sin. Nonetheless, it is a covenanted future; it is a

future with God – and all of us here, Gentile Christians along with Jews, dare to believe that we have some share in the covenanted afterlife of the story of Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth.³”

Ruth’s *hesed* (hesed) makes that covenanted future possible. Our *hesed* (hesed) makes that covenanted future possible. We take the risk. We make the commitment. *Ruth 3:5 (NRSV)* “All that you tell me I will do.” And we make the perfect match.

There is a Redeemer

It’s amazing that Naomi can make that match. She’s been transformed. When she returned to Bethlehem, the women greeted her, “*Is this Naomi?*” *Ruth 1:20–21 (NRSV)* She said to them, “Call me no longer Naomi, [that means “pleasant” or “lovely,” that was my life but that life is over!] call me Mara, [bitterness] for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

Now, she’s taking notice. She’s making plans. She’s been redeemed from her bitterness; she is Naomi again; a widow with abundance.

Naomi’s deliverance from bitterness to abundance; her restoration to herself did not occur overnight, nor did it occur in isolation. Ruth’s steadfast love, her disciplined generosity that refused to abandon Naomi to her bitterness, that endured the dark nights of her soul, that remained committed to her through it all, *Ruth 3:5 (NRSV)* “All that you tell me I will do;” Ruth’s devotion redeemed Naomi from her bitterness; it restored her faith and gave her new life.

Naomi responded to this gift by giving new life to Ruth. She saved her; that’s what “seeking security” for Ruth means. Naomi delivers Ruth from the desperate life of being a strange woman in a strange land; Naomi made her one of us; she gave her a home; she gave her a future with hope; she gave her a life of abundance.

Now, it’s our turn. “While God is the true . . . Redeemer, God also calls upon us to play a significant role in bringing redemption to the world. We must always try to be open to hearing the still small voice within. What does God ask of us? There is much that only *we* can do; we must take responsibility for ourselves and the world

³ Davis, pp.4-5.

around us. And yet we are not alone. God’s redemptive power in the universe is available to us for these tasks. We can look to God as the Source of strength and empowerment as we struggle to take the steps necessary to make our lives and the lives of others more whole and complete. So we say in [our] prayers . . . : Dear God, we beseech You to save us. . . . Dear God, we beseech You to make our own efforts fruitful. That is to say, we look to You, God, to do what only You can do to bring us to a place of wholeness. We look to You, God, to strengthen and enable us to do what only we can do to bring wholeness and peace to the world.⁴”

We look to God, and God looks to us. God looks to us to practice the hesed (hesed) of Ruth and Naomi. God looks to us to demonstrate the disciplined generosity that redeems and restores. God looks to us to take responsibility for ourselves and for the world around us.

Our pledge is one way to do that; one way to practice hesed (hesed) disciplined generosity that redeems and restores; one way to participate in God’s transformation of this world, of our neighbor, and of ourselves from bitterness to a widow’s abundance. Amen.

⁴ Ruth H. Sohn, “Verse by Verse: A Modern Commentary,” in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. Eds. Judith A. Kites and Gail Twersy Reimar. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 26.