

The Book of Ruth begins with hunger. I always thought this was a strange place to start — after all, God could solve starvation with manna in the desert. God can warn pharaoh with dreams about a seven year famine! Why shouldn't God provide food to Naomi and Elimelech? But God doesn't — instead, Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons flee from Bethlehem to Moab. After failing to appear during the first hunger, it shouldn't be surprising that God appears absent when Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi's marriage empty. There will be no miraculous resurrection. Later, Naomi's sons die as well, leaving not only their mother empty, but their wives, Orpah and Ruth on the brink of starvation.

Here is a small community, three people strong, malnourished, impoverished, hurt. According to the laws laid out in Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Leviticus, a widow in Naomi's state was to be protected. She was allowed to glean in the fields, tithes were to be given to her, and she was to be married to the brother of her husband in order to produce an heir. This last stipulation is referred to as the levirate law, and it was intended to reintegrate the widow into society — she would still bear a child for her dead husband, and that child could inherit the land and name of his deceased father. But Naomi can have no more children. She reveals to Ruth and Orpah in Chapter 1, verse 11 that she does not “still have sons in [her] womb that they may become [their] husbands”. There is no hope that Naomi will

resurrect Elimelech's bloodline, nor will Naomi be redeemed to society. She will starve.

So what should we, as the larger community that Naomi is lost to, do in this situation?

My answer is simple — we should be Ruth. I propose that Ruth the Moabite acts as God's hands in the world, that instead of salvific miracles of manna and dreams, it is Ruth's sweat and creativity that manifest the love of God in the world, and ultimately liberate Naomi from her suffering, as well as redeem them both to the larger community. Ruth — and therefore God — goes about this redemptive work in three ways. First, through Ruth's solidarity vow with Naomi, God pledges to remain loyal and empathetic to the experience of those who suffer, as well as refusing to abandon those who reject God. Secondly, God desires alleviation for those who suffer in material ways — Ruth's creative approach to the gleaning law sustains Naomi through the season. Finally, when Ruth listens to and enacts Naomi's plan for their redemption in society, she does not redeem Naomi to the same society that has oppressed her, but to a new and different society, one created with the birth of Obed. Similarly, God does not redeem through the same system that is broken, but rather through a new system that is created.

Ruth's vow of solidarity with Naomi comes immediately after she has been rejected. Though Naomi, Orpah and Ruth have all left Moab together for Bethlehem, all three seeking food and sustenance together, Naomi demands that they "Go [and] return each of [them] to [their] mother's house." Orpah, after refusing once, weeps as she turns to go back into Moab. But Ruth stubbornly stays, declaring that she will experience all aspects of life with Naomi, that "Where [Naomi] goes, [Ruth] will go; where [Naomi lodges [Ruth] will lodge; [her] people shall be [Ruth's] people, and [Naomi's] God, [her] God." (1:16-18). Even though Naomi has rejected Ruth, pushed her away, demanded that she leave her for a new, thriving life, Ruth remains loyal. "So the two of them went on to Bethlehem" (1:19), where Naomi is recognized by her former friends and neighbors, but Naomi rejects their recognition. She is no longer Naomi, or "full of joy"; instead she asks that they "call her Mara", which means bitterness, for she "went away full, and the Lord brought [her] back empty" (1:20-21). Naomi's entire identity has altered because of her experience of hardship. She is no longer full of joy, but rather bitter and wasted. Ruth, while she has promised to follow Naomi, share her life, and undergo the same experiences, does not undergo the same identity transformation. Ruth remains Ruth, even while empathizing with Mara.

By remaining independent of Mara's identity change, Ruth retains the ability to act without the debilitating bitterness and depression that marks Mara's life. This is a crucial idea in pastoral counseling -- it is a huge problem to fuse your identity with your careseeker, because you will be debilitated by their experience, and unable to help them. For the pastoral caregiver who pledges poverty with the congregation, or the Church that remains fidelius through civil war, the ability to remain hopeful and unaltered by sorrow or bitterness is crucial for creative and healing action. Ruth, though she experiences the same injustice and misfortune that Mara does, refuses to allow those experiences to dictate her faith or identity so that she might be able to help Mara.

Ruth's independence allows her to care for Mara, to "go to the field and glean among the ears of grain" (2:2). Mara allows this with a curt, "Go, my daughter", and remains in her bitter state while Ruth seeks a field to glean from. Under Judaic law, Ruth should not be able to do this — Ruth is a Moabite, she is a foreigner to whom the law does not apply (Lev. 19:9-10). But, in order to sustain Mara, she must find a way to feed her. So Ruth begins to glean in a field owned by Boaz, a close kinsman of Elimelech. While asking permission to glean his fields, Ruth reveals her knowledge that the law does not necessarily apply her, and gently asks that generosity be extended regardless (Ruth 2:7). It is this resolution to

nourish Mara that makes Ruth bold, and that boldness which encourages Boaz to bend the traditional law to include the neglected women and save them from starvation. Here, it is Ruth's practical care for Mara's hunger that bends the oppressive system, rather than any concern over Mara's spiritual state.

Gleaning in the fields does not redeem Naomi and Ruth within the oppressive system that has condemned them, but — through Boaz's sympathy — it has created a tangible reprieve that will alleviate the immediate effects of oppression. The reprieve from hunger, pain, cold and humiliation are not only charitable acts, but crucial for the spiritual well-being of anyone under oppression. Like Ruth, the Church or caregiver must be able to provide sustaining resources for the careseeker. This provision includes both intangible advocacy in the face of the system (as Ruth humbly advocates for Mara in the fields), as well as basic needs like nourishment, shelter and protection. These provisions alleviate the suffering of individuals or communities, allowing them to look forward to a space where they will longer struggle to survive under oppression, but liberate themselves from it.

Alleviation of the symptoms of oppression has too often been considered satisfactory for spiritual care, not only by the ancient Hebrew communities, but in our modern systems as well. For example, rather than criticize or reform economic structures that create millions of impoverished individuals, the called for solution is

to “alleviate or eradicate poverty” through church-run food banks, shelters and direct donations. But alleviation is not redemption. At best, alleviation entrenches the effects of oppression, allowing a select few communities moments of reprieve that are entirely dependent on their benefactors, while allowing the unoppressed the satisfaction of accomplishment.

In other words, what would have become of Mara, had Boaz changed his mind?

In the Book of Ruth, that is not a real concern, because Boaz remains beneficent through the harvest. This allows Mara a break from her bitterness — though she has lost everything, her physical needs are taken care of long enough for her to recall what an unoppressed life would be. Throughout Chapter 2, Ruth made a point of prioritizing Mara’s advice over Boaz’s, elevating Mara’s needs and concerns over the concerns of their benefactor. When Chapter 3 begins, Ruth is still in a posture of listening, as she agrees to Mara’s plan to “seek a home for [her], that it may be well with [her]” (Ruth 3:1). Mara’s plan for redemption requires that Ruth prepare herself as a bride, hide herself on the threshing floor, and lie with Boaz. This is no mere bending of Judaic law — this is scandal. There are different ways to read this, but it’s all pretty scandalous. At BEST: Radically visual dependency. At WORST: prostitution.

But Ruth's trust in Mara's plan is not foolish. She has heard what Mara needs and listens to her — Boaz's generosity cannot be endlessly relied on, unless he sees them as family. It is crucial to notice, however, that Mara cannot foresee what actually allows the plan to succeed. Mara told Ruth that, after presenting herself, she needed to listen to Boaz, for "he would tell [her] what to do." But what sways Boaz to advocate for Ruth as a wife is her entreat that Boaz, "spread [his] wings over his maidservant" — a blessing that Boaz prayed over Ruth in chapter 2, and a interchange that Mara has no knowledge of. It is not Boaz telling Ruth what to do, it is Ruth telling Boaz.

It is Ruth's creative and practical interpretation of Boaz's prayer that "a full reward be given [to her] by the Lord...under whose wings [she has] come to take refuge" (2:13) that encourages Boaz to further bend the system in place. Though there is a closer kinsman-redeemer introduced in Chapter 4, Boaz makes it clear to the kinsman that the land previously owned by Elimelech cannot be redeemed without Ruth. This is a departure from the common interpretation of levirate law, where Mara would be redeemed along with the land, but Ruth the Moabite excluded. With this subtle shift, Boaz ensures his union with Ruth and brings about a fuller redemption of Mara — one that goes beyond land and personal sustenance

and extends to children and family lineage. Mara, too old to bear children, could never create a new family for herself. But Ruth can.

At the end of the Book of Ruth, with the birth of Obed, Ruth has created a new family for Mara that comforts, feeds, and sustains her. The same women who recognize Naomi in the first chapter praise the birth of Obed as the one who will be for Mara a “restorer of life and nourisher of [her] old age.” (4:15) It is obvious that, though Mara’s hunger was alleviated by Boaz, she was fed and nourished by Ruth. Obed’s birth fully integrates Naomi back into the community, rejuvenating her joy and creating a new social system through the levirate family. The old system — one in which Mara would have married the kinsman redeemer and Ruth would have been cast aside — was not a solution to Mara’s oppression. A new system, brought about by Ruth’s ingenuity and creativity, was necessary for Mara to be reconciled to Naomi, and the widow to be reconciled to the city.

There are known systems of oppression that pastoral caregivers and the Church thoughtlessly participate in, such as certain exploitative aspects of global capitalism, as well as institutional hierarchies established on heterosexuality or race. As theologians and ministers, work within these systems is encouraged. We are put in the place of Boaz — the one with strong faith, respect for the law, and the grace and freedom to bend the law for those oppressed by it. But my suggestion

is that we become Ruth. We act around the established system to create something new and wholesome. We do more than empathize with or alleviate the suffering of the oppressed, we comfort the afflicted the way God comforts — through creative redemption. We must create new ways of feeding the oppressed, not just their physical hunger, but their deepest longing for redemption.

How do we do this? I know — you want real, tangible answers. But I think it's best to start with questions. When the cacophony rises -- voices and systems, laws and stories -- who will you listen to? Who will you trust so deeply that their home will be your home, their pain, your pain? Whose experiences will you believe? Next, how will you share your bounty? Whose body will you shelter with yours, whose hunger will you feed with your sweat? And finally — what will you create? What new system will you build for the world, so that others may find shelter under the wings of God? What will you create?