

Here's the situation for Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. First and foremost, they are widows. Well, okay, first and foremost they are women. In the customs of their time, the laws greatly favored men, and a woman's worth was solely based on the men in her life: her husband and her sons. Special provisions had to be put into religious law to mandate that widows be shown charity, because without it, they would have been nobodies.

Both Naomi's husband and sons were dead. Two strikes against her. AND, since the family had fled the country during a famine...to a country of "different" people than her own, her roots were severed. She had no place to land. She was housing insecure – strike three.

Ruth was *frum* that place that was "different" from Naomi's people. And that was an issue then, just as it is an issue for a lot of people in the United States today. (We have to remember, it is within most of our lifetimes that anti-miscegenation laws were laws passed to ALLOW interracial marriage.) The legacy of looking down on people considered outsiders still influences many of our relationships. Even amongst people of good intentions – myself included.

How many of you are aware of what a microaggression is?

A microaggression is a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority.

Oftentimes people of a dominant culture...in the United States that is White people...will ask someone whom they perceive is not a local—based on visual or auditory cues like skin color, accent, etc.— where they are “from.” While the inquiring person might believe within themselves that they are being naturally curious, the microaggression takes shape in the subtextual dynamic of “well, I can tell you’re not from HERE—that is, *my* community—so, I’m just asking the question....” (for a blunt example, watch [this](#) short video)

Here’s an example from a yard sign you might have seen: **SLIDE**



No matter where you are from, we're glad you're our neighbor.

It seems kind enough. But,

Who are the “we” – those already established.

Who is the “you” – the outsider.

There is an unstated power dynamic going on here that “I” as the established neighbor, have the authority to allow “you” the outsider to be welcome.

Who is the sign intended to speak to? Random people who might move into the neighborhood? Wouldn't it make more sense when seeing someone move in to go to the door, introduce yourself, and say "welcome to the neighborhood," without the qualifier of "wherever you're from." Does the from-ness matter? Initially, it shouldn't. Honestly, it is none of my business where someone is "from." But as you get to know one another, then each of your from-ness can be shared and connections drawn.

I hope that makes sense.

In fact, I am rarely, if ever, asked that question. I'm not *frum* northeast Ohio, but, I guess, I look and sound like I can pass for it.

Back to the story. Ruth definitely couldn't pass for being from Judah, so that was another strike against her – a woman, widow, an outsider, without a home. FOUR strikes!

And yet...and yet, she and her mother-in-law wanted badly to find a way to live despite their circumstances, living in a culture that judged them according to them. As women in this situation, they needed a redeemer.

Quite literally, the nearest-of-kin male could choose to "redeem the lives" of women in such a situation as Naomi (not Ruth, since she was an outsider, and wouldn't have had family in that area). Without the protection of a

man, they would be cast off to beg, wander, make community with other women in their situation.

Each time Robin read the term “Next-of-kin,” the Hebrew word *go-el* could have been translated as “one with the right to redeem.”

The "kin redeemer," *go-el*, is the nearest adult male who bears responsibility for redeeming, or buying back, their hard-up kin from debt slavery and avenging their blood (Leviticus 25:25-26, 48-49; Numbers 35:12; Deuteronomy 19:6, 12).

Wilda C. Gafney, in *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church (Year W)*, p219

Naomi has seen that there is a way for them to claim life. That way is through her relative Boaz, who just happens to be the man who owns the fields in which Ruth has been gleaning. The same land owner who commended Ruth in last week's reading for the care she has shown to Naomi. He has noticed Ruth, and the fact that he has noticed Ruth has not passed Naomi's attention. And Naomi has formed a plan. And friends, this plan is one for mature audiences.

Boaz was a land owner-operator, and once his harvest came in, he was willing to do the work of separating the wheat from the chaff. He also had a tendency to eat and drink heartily after a day's work. Naomi knew this, so she instructed Ruth to go to him once he consumed all he could handle and was in a state of rest and repose. The plan was a straight-forward one: once the lights were dim and no one could recognize her, Ruth was to go to him and “uncover his feet.” There is no ambiguity about this phrase being a

middle eastern euphemism for her to uncover his genitals, and she was to pleasure him. Once he arouses, and recognizes who she is, from their conversation we can tell that Boaz responds favorably to Ruth's company.

Ruth doesn't waste time. Once she has his undivided attention, Ruth is quick to let him know why she has come to him. Using another euphemism, this time for marriage, she says to him, "spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." Remember, here is the instance where "next-of-kin" can be translated "one with the right to redeem." Ruth is asking Boaz to restore Naomi's life by bringing them into his household, and allowing Ruth to bear his children and extend his/their line.

It should be noted here that Ruth has been granted Boaz's undivided attention through the use of her body and sex. This event is a mixed bag for me, as on the one hand women ought to have merit for more than just being objects of pleasure for men. On the other hand, Ruth has made a clear and calculated decision, and has gone into this situation eyes wide open. For all that Ruth and Naomi have been through, it is her decision to present herself to Boaz in this manner that offers them the best opportunity for life. It begs the question, **what decisions are any of us called to make to put ourselves on the path towards true freedom and life?**

Finally, it should be noted that Boaz sees her for much more than an object of desire. In fact, he seems to be impressed with her guile in bypassing

relationships with younger men in order to do what is necessary to win her and her mother-in-law's freedom. Boaz says:

“May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.”

To his credit, Boaz sees more than just a body—and a *foreign* body at that, where she was *from* no longer being relevant—instead he sees her compassion, her intelligence, her humility, her hard work, her fortitude; and he is willing to serve as her/their redeemer. But first, he must clear it with the one kin who is closer to Naomi than he. Gene will have the privilege of picking up on that part of the story next week, for its conclusion.

However, the storyteller gives us a glimpse of what may be in store in the last part of the chapter. Boaz fills Ruth's cloak with barley, so that she may not go back to “your mother-in-law,” he says, “empty-handed.” This episode has at least two meanings that I can suss out. For two people who have been struggling to have enough to eat, Boaz has just blessed them with abundance. So, we can see that their day-to-day necessities will most likely be served by Boaz.

Secondly, this is likely foreshadowing for the fact that with Boaz, Ruth will produce a child (and a male-child at that), filling Naomi's arms, and thereby fully restoring her to abundant life. She has been redeemed. That boy will

grow up to become the grandfather of David, and all of them, as ancestors of Jesus, the one whom we call our Redeemer.

I'd like us to take a moment to ask ourselves what we mean by that?

For me the answer is both simple and complex: My Redeemer invites me into right-relationship with God. Jesus strongly urges me to take an inventory of my life and to weigh my way of being against what he teaches the kin-dom of God to be like. (I guess that's my fancy way of explaining Jesus' call to repentance.) As I discern differences between Jesus' call and my way of being, there are adjustments I am compelled to make in order to live into Christ's great commandment to love God, self, and others.

The short text in Luke is an accompanying text with the reading from Luke. As I first read it, I was attracted to Luke's need to call attention to the women who not only followed Jesus, but "who," the gospel writer proclaims, "ministered to them[or, *him*] out of their own resources."

The opening of the chapter was a bit of a head-scratcher: "Soon afterward he went on through one town and village after another, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." "Soon after what," I asked. So, I flipped back to the final story of the preceding chapter and was bowled over.

It is the story of a woman—a known "sinner"—who crashes a dinner party to wash, and kiss, Jesus' feet. {I'm assuming the "uncovering the feet" euphemism is not in play here 😬} Actually, Luke tells us she was "weeping,

and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair, kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment.” I reflect on her actions by asking the question I posed above: **what decisions are any of us called to make to put ourselves on the path towards true freedom and life?**

Instead of seeing the beauty in this gesture, the host of the meal, a religious leader, voices the question of the dominant culture—the one who sees no need to be self-reflective: “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.”

When, in fact, Jesus knows exactly what kind of woman this is, one who recognizes that she falls short of the glory of God (for whatever reason) and seeks to rectify her circumstance. The man would do well recognize and follow suit.

Jesus addresses the woman, “Your sins are forgiven. ...Your faith has saved you; go in peace.” She has been redeemed. But notice what Jesus says here - it is NOT “I have redeemed you.” No, it is her FAITH, her faith in God through Jesus, yes, but even more so, her faith in HERSELF, to be the woman she longs to be. Finally, there is an agent of God who sees her, and advocates for her, and sends her forth to understand herself as the beloved child of God she is.

Is it, then, a coincidence that Luke begins the next chapter listing a group of women who support Jesus’ ministry from their own resources?? I think not. It is likely that she who anointed Jesus’ feet with ointment and her tears was amongst them. It is equally likely that she was among those who received

the news of Jesus' resurrection and proclaimed to herself, "I know that my Redeemer lives." For it is highly likely that she, like Naomi, like Ruth, had experienced life as death. Yet each had the grace to see that something needed to change—somehow they needed to take the initiative to align themselves with their redeemer in order to experience abundant life. Let me make sure that you hear me: with courage, in humility, with a sense of risk, but with self-agency, they had faith in the promise offered by the one who formed them and gave them autonomy over their body, mind, and spirit, no matter who tried to tell them otherwise.

Yes, those who identify as she...

Yes, those who identify as they...

Yes, those who don't desire to identify as anything...

Yes, those who identify as he...

...I know that your redeemer lives, and God calls forth from you, life!