

All of us suffer from selective memory from time to time where we remember the good things and block out the bad. Those afflicted with selective memory paint the past in pleasant pastels while viewing their present circumstances through darker shades. Will Rogers was talking about selective memory when he said, “Things ain’t what they used to be – and probably never was.” When we apply selective memory to our understanding of the scriptures the result is interpretive nostalgia. We read stories about people who lived half way around the world, spoke a different language, lived in an oriental culture and we either read our own experience and culture into theirs or we sanitize the story to make it less messy. It is easy to forget that God uses imperfect people facing imperfect circumstances making imperfect decisions to accomplish His perfect plan.

Ruth chapter 3 is messy. The chapter contains an honest account of three people, each of whom find themselves between the horns of a dilemma. This chapter is a great reminder to us that **God uses imperfect people facing imperfect circumstances making imperfect decisions to accomplish His perfect plan.**

Naomi’s dilemma: idealism vs. pragmatism...3:1-5. Naomi is concerned with finding Ruth a husband so she makes a plan. Her goal is clear: find Ruth a godly husband to secure her future and preserve the family line. So Naomi tells Ruth to make herself as attractive as possible, splash on a little perfume and go to the threshing floor of Boaz. After he has finished his work and has a belly full of food and wine he will fall asleep. Sneak in, lift up his cloak, and lie down at his feet. Ruth must be thinking, "And just where do you suppose that will lead?" Naomi’s answer in verse 4 is strategically vague, "He will tell you what to do."

The author is intentionally ambiguous about what exactly Ruth did when she “uncovered his feet.” Some interpreters make an effort to sanitize the story but I take the text at face value. When a woman bathes, puts on perfume and her best dress, and then secretively climbs under the covers with a man who has a belly full of food and wine, I don’t think anyone in any culture would read this and not see sexual overtones in the story.

Naomi is “helping Ruth.” She is not the only mother who has ever done so. But Naomi is also “helping” God. We have seen that Naomi has placed her hope in God but in this instance she decides to help Ruth by giving God a little help. Have you ever felt the need to “help” God? Have you ever been between the horns of idealism and pragmatism? Idealism says, “Just let go and let God.” Pragmatism says, “God helps those who help themselves.”

A man is out of work and sends out a resume trusting God will get it in front of the right person. If it is God’s will, he will get an interview. A few days later he starts to move from idealism to pragmatism. Just in case God has forgotten about the resume maybe a few phone calls might expedite the interview process.

A wife reads a book on marriage and realizes a man doesn’t respond well to a verbal barrage from his wife. She decides to just pray and leave this knucklehead to God. A few days later she starts thinking that God must be pretty busy running the universe and all so she decides to help Him and tells her husband what God would say to Him. “Thus says the Lord...honey.”

I face my own dilemma between idealism and pragmatism this time of year. We need strong end-of-the-year contributions to keep pace with our budget. Some days I feel very idealistic about it and simply trust God to provide for our needs as a church. Other days I sit around and think up clever and creative ways to coax money into the coffers. Which is the correct approach?

I think we can all agree Ruth's need was legitimate and Naomi's actions were understandable but were they right? The Bible merely reports what happened with no comment as to whether they were right or wrong. Life is messy isn't it?

Ruth's dilemma: honesty vs. passivity...3:6-9. Ruth goes along with Naomi's plan... in part but she decides not to just "go with the flow." Note to young lovers: If you go on a date with the thought of "we'll just see what happens," I can predict with remarkable accuracy what will happen. But if you address the issue up front and are honest about your intentions, as awkward as that may be, you might just avoid a situation that is even more awkward.

Before Boaz tells her what's on his mind she tells him what's on hers. When he wakes up and finds her at his feet he asks, "Who are you?" She says, "I am Ruth your maid. So spread your covering (wing) over your maid, for you are a close relative." (3:9). Ruth takes the initiative to make clear to Boaz why she is there. The Hebrew word for covering is the same as the word for wing (cf. Ezekiel 16:8). We saw it last week in 2:12. Boaz said, "May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wing you have come to seek refuge." Boaz was God's agent to reward Ruth. He gave her free access to his field, and protection from the young men and water from the well. Ruth said to Boaz, "Why have I found favor in your eyes?" (2:10). And Boaz answered, "Because you have come to take refuge under the wing of God." (2:11-12). Now Ruth is asking Boaz to take her under his wing.

Boaz, an older man, had expressed his love for this younger woman the way men often do; not with words but with deeds. Boaz showed his love through practical acts of kindness and words of admiration. He told her he admired her for coming under God's wings. He acted as though she was under his wing and he waited. Ruth then comes to him in his sleep, in the grain field where he has taken her under his care, and responds to this man's love with an action just as subtle and profound as the action and words of Boaz. She puts herself under his wing, so to speak, and when he wakes up and everything hangs on one sentence and whether Ruth has interpreted Boaz's actions correctly.

Imagine how fast her pulse was racing when Boaz woke up. Then the all important sentence: "I am Ruth . . . spread your wing over your maidservant." There had to have been a profound silence for a moment while Boaz let himself believe that this incredible woman had properly interpreted his kindness as true love for her. It's a beautiful scene: A middle-aged man in love with a young widow uncertain whether her heart might be going after younger men had communicated the best he could that he wanted to be God's covering or wing for her. The young widow read between the lines and finally risked an interpretation by coming in the middle of the night to take refuge under the wing of his garment.

Boaz's dilemma: love vs. lust. Boaz faces a dilemma of his own. Will he take advantage of Ruth's vulnerability or will he follow the law of God? His dilemma is a familiar one to all of us. It is about taking shortcuts vs. doing what is right; instant gratification vs. moral patience.

Think about it; this is every man's fantasy. Boaz wakes up in the middle of the night to find a beautiful, young, sweet-smelling woman under his blanket. Remember, this takes place during the time of the Judges when "everyone did what was right in their own eyes." But Boaz knew that God had spoken and it was God's words that would guide the behavior of His people and lead them to blessing. Fornication was forbidden. Having sex with someone who is not your wife is called fornication. It is forbidden both in the Old Testament (Leviticus 19:29; Deuteronomy 21:13–21) and the New Testament (Matthew 15:19). You can call it "making love," "sleeping together," "getting lucky," "hooking up," but God calls it fornication.

Boaz was a man of integrity. He believed God's word. He not only refused to take advantage of the immediate situation but he also obeyed the law of God with respect to marrying Ruth. The law specified the order in which the levirate marriage duty was to be fulfilled, and he was not the first in line...**Ruth 3:10-13.**

Boaz would do everything he could for Ruth, but it had to be done God's way. He would not take a shortcut and become intimate with Ruth. This matter had to be resolved properly, in broad daylight, in the city gates, in the presence of the nearest kin and the elders of the city. Boaz loved God more than he loved Ruth. That's the kind of man every young woman should want to marry.

Ruth Bell Graham once described her husband Billy as a man, "Who wanted to please God more than any man I'd ever met! . . . He stood head and shoulders above all the others because of the depth of his commitment to Jesus Christ. I knew I would always be second to God in his life. But what better place to be!"

Boaz then told Ruth...**3:13b-15.** It was not safe to send Ruth back into the city unescorted in the middle of the night. He could not escort her home without raising all kinds of questions, nor could it be known that any woman was there on the threshing floor that night. It would have been assumed that immorality was the purpose of her visit. And so Boaz instructed Ruth to lie down once again at his feet until morning. Before dawn and before anyone else was awake, Boaz warned Ruth not to let anyone know that a woman had been there. He then sent her away with a lovely gift...all the grain she could carry. Isn't that just like a man! She comes hoping to get a ring and he sends her away with a bag of grain! How romantic!

I want to leave you with a warning and a promise before we take communion:

1. Beware of short cuts. Life is messy and there are times we find ourselves in a dilemma unsure of what to do. If Ruth would have seduced Boaz, that would have been a shortcut. A shortcut is an ungodly, faithless action that we take to avoid pain and suffering, hard work, trusting God, or waiting. We take shortcuts in order to solve a problem the easy way, as opposed to God's way. Taking short cuts may not keep you out of heaven but they will give you a taste of hell.

The Bible presents a consistent record of the painful consequences of taking short cuts. Adam and Eve took a shortcut to be wise and all creation suffers for it. Lot's two daughters took a shortcut and got their father drunk because they wanted children so they got children – who birthed the tribes of the Moabites and the Ammonites, a thorn in the side of God's people for centuries. Abram and Sara took a short cut to have a child and the sons of Isaac and the sons of Ishmael continue to kill each other to this day. Saul didn't wait for Samuel and lost his kingdom. Moses took matters into his own hands and killed an Egyptian and was sentenced by God to 40 years of hard labor in the wilderness.

When faced with a difficult choice, be brutally honest with yourself about your professed beliefs and your pragmatic actions. Are you trusting God or forcing the issue? If you have made mistakes and experienced the painful consequences of taking short cuts, remember the promise, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose." Ro. 8:28.

2. Be aware of God's providence. **God uses imperfect people facing imperfect circumstances making imperfect decisions to accomplish His perfect plan.** Life on this fallen planet is not the way it is supposed to be. Everything is messy. There are no perfect people or pure motives.

"The world is booby-trapped. It's rigged for disappointment. On earth everything falls short of some hoped-for ideal. Everything good down here has a tragic brevity and a funny aftertaste to it. It all falls short and shortly falls apart. None of it possesses any ultimacy...We can become so cynical that we poison ourselves, so self-indulgent that we devour ourselves, so despairing that we collapse into ourselves. In fact, self-pity and self-indulgence, boredom and despair, envy and greed – such are only yearning gone sour. They are just the greasy residue that remains after yearning has gone unfulfilled too many times." Mark Buchanan

But the Gospel is the Good News that life will not always be this way. There is a place where there are no dilemmas, no disappointments and no death. Jesus died and rose again to put an end to our disappointments and to prepare a place for us where all our yearnings are fulfilled; where "the hopes and fears of all the years are met" in Him. Jesus said "NO" to the biggest shortcut of all time, a shortcut around the cross. He refused the easy path and chose the path of suffering as payment for our sins. Because He refused to take a shortcut around the cross, there is no way that God will accept any shortcut to salvation. Jesus Christ is the only way to God, and the cross is the only basis for our salvation. There are no shortcuts when it comes to our eternal destiny.

As our ushers come to serve communion let's use this time for self-examination. Let's gather up all the pieces of our lives and acknowledge before God that we have sinned, we have taken short cuts. We have not always waited on Him or trusted Him. Confess it. And then as you eat His flesh and drink His blood offer up your broken life and say, "Lord, take this imperfect life and use me to accomplish your perfect will. Take these broken pieces and put them together in a beautiful mosaic that reflects the beauty of Jesus, our kinsman-redeemer."