

Text: Ruth 4:1-12

Title: A Community Built on Love and Loyalty / translated by Min Jun Hur

1.

Last Friday morning, as I turned on the car to go to church, my second son opened the door to the garage, rubbing his eyes, and said, "Bye, Dad. Please come back early~" As I drove to church, I felt a warmth in my heart. I felt like I would miss these kinds of moments a lot when my three boys all grow up. Then I thought that this life that I have right now is a gift. When I hear stories of people around me who are struggling with serious illnesses, I realize that my ordinary, seemingly humble life is such a precious gift. Then again, when we get caught up in our busy lives, we lose our sense of gratitude, and our lives are filled with all kinds of complaints.

A Danish philosopher named Søren Kierkegaard once said that in any era, there is a unifying principle that binds the members of that era in a certain relationship. In ancient times, he said, it was emotion, but in modern times, envy (猜忌) does the job. Envy is essentially a negative expression of admiration for someone who is better or stronger than us. When we don't accept the strong, but rather try to pull him or her down, it's called envy. The bad thing about this envy is that it creates a desire to live in comparison to others. Driven by envy, modern people strive to be like everyone else, whether in possessions or in lifestyle. The good news is that envy is a unifying force in society in the sense that it binds modern people together in their common desire to live like everyone else. Modern people feel at peace when they realize that no one is better than them. This means that we don't want others to deviate from this standard and excel in what they are doing. Envy drives us to a life of comparison. It's in everyone's mind in the modern world. If you speak fluent English with a buttery accent in Korea, people don't say you're amazing. They say, "Aren't you rolling your tongue too much?" People are uncomfortable with others who drive nicer cars and live in bigger apartments, even though there's no reason to do so. They are living their own lives, and we are living our own lives, and there's no reason to compare. Do you want to live your life a little happier? Then erase envy from your mind. Enjoy and be grateful for this moment that has been given to you today. I've often said that the secret to living with gratitude is to marvel. It's marvelous that we gather and worship in this Korean church, in this little city Rochester. We have a new member who just moved here within the last month or two. Isn't it amazing how relationships are being formed through this church in just over a month, when you obviously arrived here not knowing a single person? Knowing that our lives are full of wonders, we realize that our lives are a gift. Envy breeds enmity, but admiration creates gratitude and builds hospitality.

2.

We've been meditating on the Old Testament book of Ruth. Some of you may be thinking, "Why do we need to look so deeply into a book that doesn't seem like a big deal?" But Ruth is a book that teaches us so many valuable truths. Most importantly, it gives us hope

for hospitality in a world full of hostility. It tells us what it's like to live a life of a *Hesed*, a central truth of the Bible. And we learn from Ruth that the world the Bible envisions is not one where we live well alone, but one where we live happily together. In other words, we learn from the book of Ruth that our task here on earth is to build communities of peace.

A community of peace does not just happen. The central pillar required to build this community is the Hebrew word *Hesed*. It's really hard to describe *hesed* in a single word, because it has so many meanings, but if I have to, I'd say it's "love and loyalty". *Hesed* is love and loyalty to another person in a covenantal relationship. Love is a warm heart, and loyalty is a way of life that supports that warm heart. In other words, when you love, you're responsible, and when you're responsible, you love. Boaz shows this firsthand. Boaz is responsible and loyal because he loves Ruth and Naomi.

Boaz has made a commitment to be responsible for Ruth in the threshing ground, and there doesn't seem to be anything stopping him now. He rushes to the town gate first thing in the morning to complete the legal process. At the time, the town gate was the most heavily traveled place in town, where important decisions or trials were made. The legal process he needed to complete was to listen to what a relative closer to Naomi than himself would do about Naomi and Ruth's property. The phrase that is repeated over and over in the text is "guardian-redeem." This is our translation of the Hebrew verb "Gaal." *Gaal* (גָּאֵל) is a verb that means to redeem, deliver, or revenge. The Hebrew people were a clan society, where relatives were expected to step up and help out in times of need. Naomi's family must have given their fields to someone else when they left for Moab during the famine. Now, 10 years later, she is back in her hometown, but she cannot afford to get that field back, unless a close relative comes to her aid. The dead Elimelech, Naomi's husband, had a closer relative than Boaz. Boaz had to go to him to see if he would "Gaal" for Naomi, because if he didn't want to take responsibility for the household, Boaz would be next. And the biblical term for someone who would "Gaal" was a "Goel". Boaz was willing to step up and be a Goel for Naomi and Ruth.

3.

Interestingly, as Boaz arrived at the town gate, that relative happened to be passing by at the same time: "The guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along." It seems like a coincidence, but I've said before, fate comes to us in the guise of coincidence. God was planning and working behind Boaz's back, even though he couldn't see it. Many times, the book of Ruth shows us that God was intervening and caring for Ruth's life and Naomi's life. This is why we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the chance encounters and coincidental events in our lives.

Boaz explains the situation to the relative and asks him if he would be willing to "redeem" (*Gaal*) for Naomi and Ruth. Surprisingly, the man says he would. Boaz is unfazed and moves on to his next tactic. He tells the relative that he must not only buy the field, but that he must also marry Ruth, a Moabite woman, so that Naomi's descendants will continue to live.

The relative rejects the offer. "I can't be a Goel on those terms," he says, "I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate." And with that, he takes off the sandal from his foot and throws it away. Verse 7 kindly explains to us what it means to take off a shoe and throw it away. By taking off your sandal, you are clearly indicating that you are giving up. At first there were only 10 elders at the gate, but in verse 9 we see that the whole town is gathered there. This tells us that the community's interest in Boaz and Ruth was great.

Naomi and Elimelech's family were the ones who left the community to overcome the famine. When they left, the community probably didn't seem that important. After losing her two sons and her husband, Naomi returned to the community after ten years with no expectations or hopes. Up until that point, Naomi felt that the community had no meaning in her life and that it was not there to help her. But it was the community that saved her. Boaz, a relative of her husband's, stepped forward to take on the heavy burden she was carrying for her family. Ruth, whom Naomi had treated like an invisible person, gave her life for her. In the end, it was the community that saved Naomi.

In my essay last week, I wrote about eternal life. Eternal life is not an endless loop of meaningless time. The Old Testament describes eternal life as brothers dwelling together in union. It describes eternal life as a sense of security that comes from the protection of community and the unity and solidarity of community (Psalm 133). We need to know that eternal life is communal, not personal; it is the community that protects us and keeps us alive. Therefore, building healthy communities of peace is a very important task for us Christians. Eternal life is a life of experiencing the kingdom of God here on earth. Naomi's village community is now rejoicing and celebrating with her the life that lies ahead of her.

4.

Just this time last year, my family arrived in Rochester; it was our first time here. When Naomi went back to Bethlehem, she knew some people. But we didn't know a single person in Rochester. And now a year has passed, and the reason we've been able to settle in and thrive here is because of the community. Through Dahana Church, we've met so many people, formed relationships with so many people, and those relationships have given us the strength to survive here. As we look back on the year, we realize that it was the community that was most important to us. Back in California, our visas were coming to an end and we were barely surviving with the support of the community. Nevertheless, you gave us land to stand on and now this became home for us. Truly, your hesed saved our lives. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your hesed, for trusting and serving an untested minister.

This summer, contrary to our fears, many Korean people are coming to Rochester. This is a very foreign land to them, like it was to our family a year ago. We, Dahana Church, need to be the ground for them to stand on; we need to be their support and shield; we need to make them feel like this is their home, so that they don't feel like they are strangers at all;

we need to be their home, so that through this community, they can have a taste of eternal life and a taste of heaven.

Hesed, which can be summarized as "Love and Loyalty," is the hope that saves this world. In a world of false peace fueled by hostility and envy, we must create a community of true peace. The book of Ruth reminds us that hospitality and solidarity can save an individual, save a community, and restore humanity to a beautiful community of peace. Love and loyalty was the attitude of life that our Lord Jesus showed us. Without love and loyalty to God, and without love and loyalty to the world that God loved, Jesus would have never gone to the cross. Now we, too, must follow Jesus and follow the path he took, living out the hesed of love and loyalty in the encounters that come our way. It is a path that Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi have already walked. Live out the hesed of love and loyalty, or love and faithfulness. Cherish the little encounters in your life and let the hesed flow through them. It's those little gestures that will add up to be the beautiful kingdom of God on earth that He so desires.