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“Grasp the Good”

Hebrews 10:19–25
Ruth 1:1–18

One of the best parts of being a pastor is when a couple—sometimes young and idealistic, sometimes not so young and with enough experience to be cautiously idealistic—a couple holds hands and, in front of their families and best friends and to the world, affirm,

“I take you to be my wife, and I promise to be your loving husband.”

“I take you to be my husband, and I promise to be your loving wife.”

That’s the idealism part.

And then we get to the terms of the contract.
to the nitty-gritty:

*“In plenty and in want;
in joy and in sorrow;
in sickness and in health;
as long as we both shall live.”*

When I hear those enduring promises, I remember Karl and Faye. They were at worship almost every Sunday, and at most church activities. Faye was a daughter of missionaries in the Sudan. They had reared several children. She was rich in care and had good words for all. She was a notable Deacon and friend.

And then slowly Faye became confused, and forgetful. It was the beginning of Alzheimer’s. And as we can never truly understand, Faye was on a long, painful slide ... and it was so difficult for Karl. But he stayed by her side. He made the meals ... cleaned the house... read the newspaper to her ... her favorite books and extended Bible passages.

As Faye’s illness progressed, memory evaporated and she no longer recognized Karl. Sometimes she simply ignored him,

sometimes she asked who he was and chatted pleasantly as if he was a stranger.

Then she was occasionally unkind, harsh, hurtful and she insisted that he leave her alone.

Karl was heartbroken. Still, he was with her every day.

“Why do you do this day after day, Karl,” **How** can you do it?” I once asked. “She doesn’t know who you are. How can you subject yourself to this every day?”

Karl answered, “Because I said I would. I promised to love Faye in sickness and in health, as long as we lived. We had lots of health together. Now, this is the sickness part.”

There’s a story in the Bible like that. It is a literary masterpiece of exceptional beauty. First it is about three married couples; then it is about two women.

And finally it is about God and the way God uses the small, what seem to be mundane details of human life for God’s own purposes.

Elimelech and Naomi, Israelites, Jews— from Bethlehem —they pack up during a famine and move across the border/they migrate to Moab. They thrive in Moab. They have two sons, and those sons marry Moabite young women, Orpah and Ruth.

It’s a cross cultural situation ... Orpah and Ruth are different ethnically and racially from Elimelech and Naomi and their sons (they’re from Israel ...they are Jews.)

To Naomi and Elimelech, Ruth and Orpah are foreigners, outsiders. But the Jewish family welcomes them.

And then life begins to unravel. Elimelech dies. Then their two sons die. Now we have a Jewish widow in a foreign land, with her two widowed daughters-in-law, who, of course, are already living in their own country. A widow in Israel was in trouble. By law, the closest relative of her deceased husband is responsible for her

welfare and protection. It's called Leverite marriage. If there is no one, she is in a deep trouble. There is no one for Naomi, so she decides to go home to Israel, to Bethlehem, and hope for the best.

Orpah and Ruth, her daughters-in-law start out with her. But Naomi pleads with them to return to their homes and families, where their prospects will be infinitely better than in the company of a Jewish widow who has no hope at all.

That's certainly, a kind, commonsense decision. Orpah agrees and leaves and returns to her home and family.

Ruth, however, refuses. Naomi pleads: go home, do the right thing, take care of yourself.

Ruth's response is pure poetry, words read at many weddings although they really have nothing to do with marriage.

“Where you go, I will go.
Where you lodge, I will lodge.
Your people shall be my people.
Your God shall be my God
Where you die, I will die.”

The rest of the story is equally good. In fact, if the Eagles can't get an offense going against the Dolphins this afternoon, turn off the TV, or at least hit the mute, find the Bible, and read Ruth. It's only four pages long. It's near the front of the Old Testament, tucked in between Judges and 1 Samuel where hardly anybody can find it.

It's a love story. Naomi and Ruth, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, both widows, return with Ruth to Bethlehem.

Ruth takes care of Naomi by following the farmers during harvest and picks up leftover grain.

The owner of the fields, Boaz, sees what is happening and tells his workers to leave plenty behind for Ruth.

Ruth tells Naomi about it. Naomi sees something life-changing happening and basically encourages Ruth to make her move, which she does.

Naomi encourages, “Visit Boaz at night, while he's sleeping. Uncover his feet and lie down,” which the scholars tell us is a metaphor for something more intimate and interesting and

productive. Ruth does what she is told, and the rest, as they say, is history. Boaz and Ruth fall in love, marry, and after this inconsequential, very human interlude, the story of God and God's people continues.

The story itself is the point. **God uses the modest, mundane details of modest, mundane people for great purposes that cannot always be seen at the time, particularly by the people living those modest, mundane lives.**

The point is that God uses, for life-changing purposes, human goodness, loyalty, fidelity; God blesses human love when it is selfless and vulnerable, when, in St. Paul's words, "it seeks **not** its own way." **God blesses and uses goodness.**

The problem has always been that it is difficult to know what the good is ... and how to do the good in the real world.

It's messy and dangerous out there, full of ambiguity and doubt.

What is the good in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Israel?
How about today in Paris?

What is the good when it comes to the rights of women to make critical decisions about pregnancy and childbearing?

What is the good when families are fleeing for safety and for a healthy future, and are met by fences and walls? That need not be of concrete and wire, but fences and walls stubbornly resistant in the hearts and minds of people.

It's messy out there, and so it's tempting for Christians to turn our backs on the world, basically to concede that goodness probably not even possible, out there in the chaotic ambiguity of the world,

So we'll pursue goodness in an atmosphere we can control, in a community that thinks the same as we, a cloistered monastery or convent. It's not too difficult to hold to the good in a monastery, after all.

Besides, the world doesn't seem much interested in the good. Huge American corporations lie to the government, and to their own employees and stockholders...and to those who buy their products.

Once-respected corporate leaders disappear in disgrace.

Mutual fund managers steal profits.

And have you been to a movie and sat through the previews?

American popular culture is obsessed with the bad, the ugly, the violent. The most profitable movies, it is reported, by a wide margin are movies with extreme violence; and a close second are movies that combine sex and violence, often at the expense of women.

So yes, the temptation is to shut it out and pursue the good in here, in the comfort and security of this sanctuary, this religious community, and to give-up on any possibility for goodness in the world.

The temptation to back away from the messy world has been almost irresistible from the very beginning. When the first Christians were small minorities, ridiculed, persecuted by the culture around them, it was understandable that they might withdraw, retreat from the world to the security and safety and moral certainties of their own fellowship. But the New Testament itself won't allow that. Jesus' way urges, take a stand. Do good!

The Letter to the Hebrews, which Jeanne read, is insistent: **Hold fast. . . . Provoke one another to love and good deeds."**
Paul insists ... "Always seek to do good to one another and to all." 1 Thessalonians 5:14
"Be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." 1 Corinthians 16:13

Jesus consistently urges us to do the good thing, to hold to the good and to do it in the world, in the public marketplace with all its messy ambiguity, in the political and social arenas as well as in our relationships, our commitments with one another.

The Bible consistently insists **that your life and mine are used by God for God's own purposes, that the reason for urging us to be steadfast, courageous, strong, loving, and good is because that's the stuff God uses—even the undramatic, inconsequential stuff—in order to build a kingdom of goodness on earth...among us...through us.**

Last Wednesday was Veterans' Day. Veterans' Day always reminds me of the quiet, mostly undramatic virtues of loyalty and duty and steadfastness and self-sacrifice of so many men and women who have joined into the service of our nation. November 11 always reminds me of uncles and cousins of mine who went off to war and did not come home and the simple, almost innocent, goodness of their sense of duty. On **November 11, I was reminded how Tom Brokaw wrote/and then proclaimed; "They won the war, and saved the world, and came home and rebuilt our country."** *The Greatest Generation*

Hold to the good. It reminds me of all the people before me who went about their lives with quiet, undramatic faithfulness, who went to work, paid their bills, took care of their families, never got ahead very much, but whose steady commitment, whose grasp on the good, is the foundation on which your life and mine rests.

God, is the one we meet, perhaps unconsciously when we love with no guarantees that we will be loved in return,
 when we remain true to our convictions,
 when we do the good with no certainty that we will be rewarded:

citizens to their government and civic responsibilities;
 employees to employer, and employer to employees;
 parents to children in good times and not-so-good times;
 and then, as often happens, years later, children to parents; wives to husbands; husbands to wives;
 partners, friends, men and women—
 all of us, doing the good, doing God's work, building God's kingdom by quietly doing what we have to do.

I remember back to Karl and Faye. At times I noted a curious look on Karl's face, a look as if the burdens were not too heavy to bear at all, as if they were light, a privilege, a sign, borne up, as if on another's shoulders, being led toward some higher way ...

following a way I would not understand... and could only glimpse.

God is the one we meet when we dare to be foolish, when we love without the certainty that we will be loved in return, when we remain true to our convictions... and to our commitments.

Just where we are, living quite ordinarily, living patiently,
it is here precisely that we can experience the presence of the living Jesus.

The presence of the kingdom of God.

God uses the ordinary lives of ordinary people, our steadfast, quiet courage to bring about God's will... God's way.

That, by the way, is the way it goes for Ruth, too. She lives out her ordinary life with Boaz in Bethlehem. They have a son whose name is Obed, and Obed will marry and have a son whose name is Jesse, and Jesse will marry and have a son whose name is David, **and he will become a noted ruler.**

And that means that Ruth, who grasped the good and held-on so many years ago, was the great-grandmother of David the king

and the many times great-grandmother of another child of Bethlehem whose name is Jesus.

So, do grasp on to the good. Embrace the good.

You never know what might come of it.

Amen.