

I Love It When a Plan Comes Together
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17
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While it was easily one of the more ridiculous television shows of my childhood, “The A-Team” spawned two memorable images. The first is the ubiquitous Mr. T with his gold chains and, shall we say, interesting hairstyle. The other is the title of today’s sermon, taken from among the final lines of every episode of “The A-Team,” when the Team’s leader, Hannibal Smith chomps on his cigar, smirks, and says, “I love it when a plan comes together.”

The plan, of course, is the impromptu one which he fashions to get the team out of the trouble caused by his earlier bad planning, and it seemed that in every episode they would get locked in some decrepit warehouse waiting to get pummeled by the bad guys. And then they would look around and see what spare parts were lying around and, out of their combined engineering resourcefulness, assemble enough gadgetry or weaponry to subdue their opponents and emerge victorious, claiming it was all part of the plan. We all knew better.

The truth is that this is often what most of us do when faced by the trials and tribulations of life. In order to survive, we see what is at the ready: friends, family, hopefully church, intelligence, imagination, whatever is available, and assemble it into something which helps us get out of the jam we are in, hopefully to a brighter future. Not all of these plans are as successful as we might like them to be, but

frequently the “plan comes together,” perhaps even often enough to delude us into believing that this way of living works. But let’s call it what it is: planning by crisis management. Most of us are notoriously bad planners.

Strategic planning, on the other hand, is planning of a different order. Strategic planning looks ahead and devises a comprehensive way to get from point A to point B. It does not wait for crisis but presumes its inevitability. It does not hope that the needed tools will happen to be lying around, but arranges for the tools to be available to avoid being in the wrong place and the wrong time in the first place. Strategic planning recognizes, as one astute observer has put it, that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. If we are going to get anywhere in life or faith, we need something like a plan.

Well, it so happens that the book of Ruth is a case study in strategic planning, both human and divine. In Naomi’s plan to find Ruth a husband, we see a Biblical example of good strategic planning. Rather than wait until she is too old to do something about her daughter-in-law’s plight, she puts together a scheme worthy of a daytime drama. “Now wash and anoint yourself,” she says to Ruth, “and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor.” When you find Boaz, “go and uncover his feet and lie down.”

The way the lectionary is constructed conveniently leaves out the very part which is the juiciest, the part which would have intrigued the listeners in days of

old and kept them buzzing for weeks. In between the beginning of chapter three and the end of chapter four — the parts we read — is the semi-, or not so, semi-sexual episode between Ruth and Boaz, as well as a display of Boaz's honor, and the negotiations which lead to the marriage and the birth of the child who will make King David possible. Allow me to digress so the whole story makes a little more sense.

If we had read the whole story, we would have heard about how Naomi's husband and two sons died while they were all living in the country of Moab. Naomi's sons had taken as wives two Moabite women, one of whom, Ruth, decides she will stay with her mother-in-law who has decided to return to Judah where it is rumored there is food in abundance. The other returns to her family of origin, childless, and hoping for support from her own people. Naomi and Ruth journey back to Bethlehem in Judah just at the beginning of the barley harvest.

At this point, it is important to remember that this was not an easy time for widowed women with no children, both economically and socially. Not only was a family needed to provide the necessities of life, but moreso to provide for the continuance of the family name, which in those days, was the way people understood immortality. If your name lived on through your descendants, so did you. Following the deaths of their husbands, neither Naomi or Ruth had the means to support themselves nor provide for the continuance of their husbands' names.

But back to the story. In order to try to get by, Ruth takes the opportunity to follow along behind the people harvesting the barley crop and pick up what they leave behind in a process called gleaning. While she is gleaning, she falls in with some members of Naomi's extended family and she is allowed to glean unmolested because of her faithfulness in sticking beside her mother-in-law, their relative. When she returns home that night to Naomi, she finds out that the man who has given her this permission is none other than one of Naomi's closest relatives, our hero Boaz. From then on, Ruth sticks close to these harvesting relatives. Then we come to the part of the story we read today in which Ruth is instructed to find Boaz in the privacy of the threshing floor, the building where the kernel of the grain is separated from its hull. And so she uncovers his feet, which some commentators have suggested is a not-so-subtle euphemism for hanky panky, and lies down with him until he awakens to find her there and learns that she is related to him through Naomi.

Leaving aside questions about the real Hollywood rating on this story, it may be helpful to explain why it is important that he is a kinsman, and just why Naomi suggested this tactic. In the culture of the time, it was not only customary, but required, for a man to marry his brother's childless wife in the event of his brother's death, and if a man had no brothers, another man in the family would assume that obligation. The idea was to provide both for the welfare of women, though some of you may debate that, and to make sure that the dead relative's

name lived on after him as I described earlier. Any children born of the brother would be considered the offspring of the dead man. Naomi sees an opportunity to make this happen with Ruth and Boaz, so she hatches her strategic plan.

On the threshing floor that night, Boaz sees his responsibility before him and makes plans to take her as his wife. This is the content of the rest of the story, which concludes, as we have heard, with the birth of a child to Ruth and Boaz and the preservation of the family's lineage. It also establishes the place of the virtuous Boaz among the ancestors of King David.

So there's the human element of strategic planning revealed in the book of Ruth, and here's the divine. The idea of a man marrying his brother's childless widow, the so-called practice of levirate marriage, is presented in the Old Testament as God's idea. The idea of gleaning, or providing for the poor who cannot support themselves on their own land, is also God's idea. Both are part of the strategic plan by God to provide for those who cannot take care of themselves, when crises arise. What's more, as the end of the story makes clear, God has a strategic plan for Israel through David, and from the Christian perspective then through Jesus Christ. The message of the story, taken as a whole, is that God's strategic plan, if followed faithfully by we mere human beings, leads to the kind of peace, welfare, and community God envisioned in the garden.

And we see in the story of Ruth that God's strategic plan is followed pretty well. Boaz is depicted as a faithful ancestor of David, as one who followed the

commandments that required gleaning, and doing the right thing by marrying his kinsman's widow. The book offers no mention of a divine strategic plan, and doesn't even deal much with God at all. In fact, the characters just go about their lives of sowing, reaping, and threshing, marrying and having children, grieving their loved ones, surviving, making decisions. They probably did not feel part of a divine drama as they did all these things, but even so they were, as the lineage at the end of the book makes clear. But the story does makes clear that it was Naomi's human strategic plan which made it possible for everyone to cooperate with God's divine strategic plan. As little baby Obed, son of Ruth and Boaz, is held high by the midwife, perhaps we can envision both Naomi and God, smoking their stogies, smirking, and saying, "I love it when a plan comes together."

Friends, God's strategic plan is for shalom, for peace, for prosperity, for wholeness. God's strategic plan calls for the leveling of the mountains and the raising of the valleys. God's strategic plan calls for the obliteration of distinctions between Jew and Gentile, male and female, differing skin colors or any other thing that keeps us apart. God's strategic plan calls for faithful disciples of Jesus Christ to care for one another and live joyful, abundant lives. But even the best-laid plans of God are not always fulfilled according to the original timetable, because the players in the drama are not always as cooperative as anticipated. But when we play by the rules, and when we do our own strategic planning, God's plan comes to fruition more easily, more fully, and more joyfully.

Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the world's recent economic downturn is that it has prompted many a good household conversation about budgeting, saving, and giving and in turn, inspired many a meeting with a financial planner, to avoid economic upheaval in the future. If you have ever seen one of these financial planners, you know that you come away with something like a strategic plan for financing your retirement, with recommendations on how much to save, where to invest, etc. Of course, one of the recommendations is that you should update your plan every year or whenever there is a significant change in your life such as a child, or employment, or what have you. Likewise, your insurance agent recommends an annual review of your policy, a policy that is, in effect, a strategic plan for protection of you, your family, and your possessions. And, of course, at the end of your annual visit to the doctor, and you are going to the doctor regularly, aren't you?, you usually have a conversation about whatever steps might be necessary to maintain your good health, whether it be changes to diet, exercise, etc. Again, in essence, a strategic plan for you health.

If you have not figured out where this is going, shame on you! How many of us have a strategic plan for your spiritual lives? How many of us set annual goals and objectives for the development of our faith, or that of our children? How many of us even think about what our spiritual point B is if today is point A? Seminarians and those in the process of seeking ordination have to do this in consultation with the committee charged with shepherding would be pastors

through their preparation, and persons under the care of a Spiritual Director might include something like this, but for most Christians, the idea of planning to grow spiritually has probably never crossed their minds. I've heard countless times people express their wants and desires to be better Christians, or lament that they don't know the Bible well enough or that they don't pray enough, but my hunch is that they've not sat down and actually written out a plan. Have you?

As most of you know, this church has begun the process of developing a strategic plan, a roadmap to get us as a people, as an institution, where God wants us to go. It's a plan that will help us to more fully cooperate with God's strategic plan. But I daresay that the church's strategic plan will be helped immeasurably if each one of us has a strategic plan for getting where God wants each of us to be. Like Naomi who desired for her daughter-in-law the security she deserved and that was part of God's strategic plan, we actually have to do something to bring it to reality, to cooperate with God. It doesn't just happen by wishing for it. If we want to end violence against women, and the sex trade in Costa Rica, we need a plan. If we want to protect God's creation, we need a plan. If we want to be a community of believers known for something more than speaking English together, we need a plan. But to do all these things, we need God's faithful, the modern day disciples of Jesus Christ, to be actively trying to cooperate with God in their daily lives, growing in faith, developing gifts, discerning God's spirit, following Christ as

disciples whose most important task in life is to love God and love neighbor. And to do that, we each need a plan.

I would invite you, to go home today and begin to have the conversations and the prayers which will lead to making for yourselves a strategic plan for your faith. And please know that nothing would make me happier than to help you work on one, or to put you in touch with someone who can. It is my earnest prayer that each of you, and us together as a church, and God in highest heaven, will be able to say with divine regularity, "I love it when a plan comes together!" Amen.