

The Story: Just For Who You Are

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[0 : 00] Howard spent 20 years in local church ministry at his home church and then at Strathavon Baptist Church near Owens Sound, Ontario. He was called to military chaplaincy in 2008, somewhat reluctantly initially, but he has never regretted it.

Howard was posted to Edmonton in 2010 and was deployed to Afghanistan with the unit he served as chaplain in 2011-2012.

He was posted to the number one service battalion in 2013, then to the base side as faith community coordinator for the Protestant Chapel in 2017.

He was promoted to major in 2018, and as I said last Sunday, Howard and I could be major pain in each other's neck.

Boo. And he was appointed as senior base chaplain. That's a big deal. Howard and his wife Dana have been married since 1987.

[1 : 03] That's the year I graduated from high school. Actually, it's the year after I graduated from high school. Weird. And I thought I was old. He said he's still delirious, and Dana is resigned.

They have three sons, Will, who's getting married in February, Noah, who lives in Ontario, and Elijah, my young friend, who rarely emerges from his room.

It's a joy for me to welcome my friend Howard to Bramard this morning. Howard, God's blessings on you as you share from your heart and his word this morning, my brother.

Well, it is a pleasure to be here with you. Not with Kent, but with you. I'd like to read from the book of Ruth, the third chapter, the first ten verses.

If I can read this. Because, you know, I was married in 1987. All those long years ago. Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, that is Ruth, my daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you?

[2 : 10] Is not Boaz our relative with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash, therefore. Anoint yourself. Put on your cloak.

And go down to the threshing floor. But do not make yourself known to the man until he's finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies.

And go and uncover his feet and lie down. And he will tell you what to do. And she, Ruth, replied, all that you say I will do. So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her.

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly, uncovered his feet, and lay down.

At midnight the man was startled and turned over. And behold, a woman lay at his feet. He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.

[3 : 11] And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first, that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich.

As Kent so kindly pointed out, my wife and I have been married since 1987. Well, long before Dana, wave Dana.

Long before, she's the one in the poppy dress. Long before Dana and I were married, in the mists, beyond the threshold of time, we were once adolescents.

It's not difficult to imagine in my case. I still look rather youthful. And I was much, much more juvenile, and still am, than Dana, the sophisticated townie.

You see, I grew up on a dairy farm in Ontario. But Dana, Dana was a townie. And she could walk to school. She could go home for lunch.

[4 : 26] And even walk to the corner store. These hip urban activities were well out of reach for me.

They were something I only saw on TV and movies. Such amazing experiences were completely out of reach for a yokel from the sticks.

And she, too, was out of my reach. Heh, heh, heh. In dumb adoration, I gazed upon her beauty.

You know, this would work better if it was closer to Valentine's Day. Anyway. Just remember everything I say today. And remember. And I thought, how can I attain the unattainable?

How can I gain her love? Even her notice. So I hit upon an old trick. I confess publicly, and with some little humiliation, that I wrote poetry.

[5 : 35] Awful, horrible, dreck. And she will agree. Originality was not my strong suit.

I was no budding E.E. Cummings or Robert Frost. Mary had a little lamb. Had more tortured soul and marvelous turns of phrase than my pitiful trifles.

So you will all breathe a vast sigh of relief to know that I will not be quoting any here. Suffice to say that I turned to song lyrics for my inspiration.

Changed a few words. Added Dana's name in a few appropriate places. And voila. An instant make Dana fall in love with me formula.

It didn't work. I'm not sure why. The tortured soul of the artiste was obvious in every plagiarized phrase.

[6 : 36] The puppy-eyed devotion of my smitten, devotion of the smitten, dripped from every ripped-off word. But it wasn't really me.

They weren't my words. It wasn't my poetry. They were cut-and-paste love notes. I was only parroting what others had written. And we've seen the same thing in movies.

I'm sure you've seen a few movies like this. The tongue-tied hero stands under his beloved's window and whispers sweet nothings up to her. Sweet nothings whispered to him from behind some bushes by some more experienced pitcher of Wu.

But inevitably, the target of said Wu finds out that the fellow who'd been murmuring such winsome and poetic missives of love is, in fact, a pathetic, awkward twerp.

However, out of the disaster of discovery, a shining, brilliant triumph emerges. The hero, tongue-tied, stumbling, uncertain, embarrassed, confesses his love in monosyllables, but with his true feelings bared to her gaze.

[7 : 53] She melts, as his earlier pretty but parroting phrases are replaced by stuttering but honest words. He didn't need coaching, after all.

She loves him for who he is. For some reason. Just as, eventually, and obviously, Dana learned to love me, or at least tolerate me, for who I am.

And we find Ruth in much the same position. She and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, where they eventually settle in. I'm sure you all know the story, so I won't burden you with a summary, but as we say in the military, BLUFF.

That's an acronym. We love acronyms in the military. Everything has an acronym. It's very confusing. BLUFF means bottom line up front. Bottom line up front.

Naomi now calls herself Mara, meaning bitter, since the deaths of her husband Elimelech and her two sons, Malon and Killian, leaving her without income and support, except for the redoubtable Ruth, who will not abandon her mother-in-law.

[9 : 11] And the words she says, your God will be my God's, and so on, well, those were actually our wedding vows, coincidentally enough. She vowed then to follow me wherever I went.

Ha, ha, ha. Serves you right. She didn't know Edmonton was in the future. Well, and who knows what's in the future? I'm probably posted next year.

Who knows? So back to the bottom line up front. There's Naomi with nobody but Ruth to support her and vice versa.

And still, they're living a hand-of-mouth existence. So one day, Ruth goes out gleaning. Now, this was the ancient Near East version of welfare, more or less. Farmers, as they harvested their crop, would not pick up every single dropped stalk of grain.

They would leave some on the fields. Furthermore, they would leave some uncut on the verges of the fields. And when Ruth goes out to glean the stuff that's been deliberately left by the farmers for the poor, it's April.

[10 : 25] It's barley harvest. And there's enough barley dropped or left for Ruth to collect to feed both her and Naomi Mara. And her hard work and her good character become known, well-known throughout the village.

And later, Boaz remarks in verse 11 of chapter 3, all my fellow townsmen know you are a woman of noble character. And after some days, Naomi Mara discovers that little Ruth, the Moabite, she's called that six times, emphasizing her foreignness, though that doesn't seem any impediment, given her sparkling character, has been gleaning in the fields of this strapping fellow, Boaz.

Now, our Boaz is a kinsman. Oh, happy day. They were both aware, both Naomi Mara and Ruth were aware, that Boaz had a kinsman-redeemer relationship to them.

As a close male relative to Ruth and Naomi, it was his right to redeem, that is, purchase Elimelech's estate. And they knew that if they played their cards right, they could both be rescued from poverty, and Ruth could glean a husband.

So, Naomi coaches Ruth, bathe yourself, anoint yourself with oils, go to Boaz at night on the threshing floor, mark the place he lays down, go uncover his feet, and lie down.

[11 : 57] He'll tell you what you're to do. Now, apparently this custom was unknown to Ruth, but Boaz, he would get the point. Ruth should meekly do whatever Naomi has told her, followed by whatever Boaz tells her.

Now, the interesting thing is, in this part of the story, is that Ruth does do exactly what her mother-in-law tells her to do, except for the last item.

For when we next see Ruth at the threshing floor later that night, lying beside Boaz, or rather at his feet, as he sleeps beside his grain to guard it from thieves and animals, the narration continues.

In the middle of the night, something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. Who are you? He asked. I'm your servant Ruth, she said.

Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman redeemer. Now, Naomi had told Ruth, then he'll tell you what you're to do. But when the time comes, Ruth takes the initiative, and tells Boaz what she wants.

[13 : 14] Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman redeemer. Now, what's she saying? I think the version I read says something about, spread the corner of your wings over me.

I can't find it now. The print is so small. But, believe me, it's there. Spread the corner of your garment, spread the corner of your wing over me.

What does that mean? What's she saying? Hey, honey, I'm cold over here. Give me some of that blanket, you hog. Or, in some now obscure ancient Near Eastern euphemism, is she making advances?

Neither. Commentators, remarks the commentator, they're remarkably ubiquitous, and quote each other. Commentators frequently invoke ancient and modern Arabic custom as further evidence that the placing of a garment over a woman is a symbolic claim to marriage.

So, in other words, Ruth was asking, will you marry me? The exact correspondence of terminology between chapter 3, verse 9, and Ezekiel 16, verse 8, where God is described as spreading the corner of his garment over Israel and making her his, is more evidence that Ruth is indeed proposing marriage.

[14 : 39] But she does it in all humility, describing herself first as his servant, and then reminding him that he is her kinsman, and that she therefore has some right and reason to look to him for support, if not salvation.

So far from simply parroting what Naomi tells her, far from being a victim, Ruth takes the initiative. She speaks up.

She doesn't rely on whispered instructions from the bushes to win her love. She speaks her own lines. Alien though she is, and her foreignness is repeatedly emphasized, remember, and therefore outside the covenant boundaries of Israel, Ruth, nonetheless, becomes part of God's grand story.

The story that has a beginning in God and God said, and a providential middle as he brings each thread of the plot to a conclusion in salvation.

And foreign Ruth, foreign Ruth gets into this story when she steps out of the social roles in which she's been placed by others, daughter-in-law, Moabitess, Gleaner, and speaks her own lines.

[16 : 04] The consequence is that she gets into the main plot. She's no bit player and becomes an ancestor of Jesus himself.

As we see in Matthew 1, verse 5, in that long, often thought, boring genealogy, but there are skeletons in the, that's a whole other sermon, skeletons in the closet in Matthew 1.

And there is a lesson for all of us in this, beyond it being inadvisable to rely on someone else's eloquence and matters of the heart. And that is this.

God loves us as we are. He does not need to be cajoled to love us, nor fooled into loving us by an actor standing in the bushes.

He just loves us. He just loves us. But, there's always a but, he does not leave us where we are.

[17 : 17] Thankfully, he takes us beyond ourselves, like Boaz took Ruth to a new place in her life. God does not simply declare his love for us, his church, his bride, and then say, now don't you ever go, don't go, oh, I shouldn't sing, don't go changing, you know the song?

Well, maybe you don't, not the way I sing it. Don't you ever change. God doesn't say that. God doesn't say, don't change. Don't strive for holiness.

Don't exert yourselves for justice. Don't hold out a hand to the fallen. Don't sue the ill. Don't care for the wounded and the broken. Just, just stay the way I found you.

God does not say that. And he does not demand that in order to love us that we become those we're not. He does not expect to hear lines in our prayers plagiarized from C.S. Lewis or Max Licato or your favorite pastor.

Probably not. The beautiful thing is that like Ruth, God loves us for who we are. Broken, foreign, beaten down, maybe a little forward and takes us to new places and helps us become more, more than we are.

[18 : 56] Amen. Amen. Was I supposed to do something else?

Oh, that's a good idea. Okay. I think I can do that. Have you got anything written for me to read? No? No, you gotta make it up just as you are. Speak your own lines.

All right, let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you that as Ruth got into the story, spoke her own lines and was loved for who she was, but not left where she was.

That you too love us for who we are, broken and sinful, wayward and forward, more than a little stupid sometimes.

and take us to places we never imagined, places in ourselves that we never imagined we could go.

[20 : 01] That you take us beyond ourselves and give us strength and hope, courage and determination to live the life you would have for us to serve you and to serve your church and to serve our world and our community.

And so we pray that you would give us the lines to speak, that you would encourage us, that you would inspire us because you love us and have called us to be yours.

Amen.