

Ruth 2:1-23; Luke 6:36-38

**From Despair to Hope©
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Today is the second sermon in this series on the Book of Ruth. It's such a beautiful story of loyalty and love and commitment. It's almost easy to overlook some of the real issues that were happening in that day.

Last week I pointed out that, while Ruth – the daughter-in-law of Naomi – insisted on going to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, she was a foreigner from a country that the Israelites despised. There was such a strong sense of nationalism, and cultural purism among the Israelites that they were not particularly open to immigrants coming in and joining them – especially from Moab, Ruth's homeland.

There definitely were laws and certain cultural practices in place that helped immigrants become an accepted part of the culture. If one was visiting a native of the country, often times more openness and hospitality was shown. But stranger who had no personal connections had it much harder.

We have to remember that widows (which both Naomi and Ruth were) were not just women whose husbands had died. Unless there were sons or lots of close males in the immediate family – to be a widow meant you were a woman of poverty; a woman who was forced to do menial work just to survive. You weren't just trying to pay bills, you were trying to find food – gleaning the fields is a good metaphor for scraping the bottom of the barrel – scavenging for any morsel you could find.

Often times any work you could get was hard labor in the role of a servant. Widows relied on the familial laws that said that the next of kin would take care of you – or, if your deceased husband had a brother, he was responsible for marrying you and taking care of his brother's land and children, or to create children so his legacy lived on and his widow was taken care of.

In Naomi and Ruth's case there were no other sons or brothers. And we remember that Naomi was bitter. She had lost her husband and her two sons and had no one – no one but Ruth who was a foreigner – to care for her.

“Call me Mara” – she told her women friends. For I am a bitter woman. God had dealt me a hard blow.

So, Ruth goes to find a field where she can glean stalks of grain and provide some food for her and Naomi. She happens to end up in the field of a wealthy man named Boaz, who saw Ruth and asked who she was. The foremen told him she was the foreigner who had come home with Naomi. She had given up her homeland and her own people to come take care of her mother-in-law. And she had asked permission to pick up sheaves from the fields that were left behind. She had worked hard all morning without even taking a break.

And so it was that Boaz had compassion. He seemed to be impressed with Ruth and her loyalty and commitment to Naomi. He told all the men to leave her alone – do not bother her, do not harm her or humiliate her. In fact, they were instructed to leave extra loose grain behind so she had more to pick up.

He gave Ruth food to eat until she was full, and then gave her some to take home to Naomi. And he told her to stay close to his other young women servants so she will be safe.

There are several things in this narrative story that is written in Hebrew. The Hebrew stories are full of puns which we often miss out on with the English translation.

The Hebrew word that is translated into English as “foreigner” comes from the same root word in Hebrew that is translated as “take notice.” Literally, in verse 10, after Boaz says kind words to Ruth, she is actually saying, “why do you notice me, when I am one who is “not noticed” – a foreigner.

Truth is, she may well have been noticed in a very negative way, had it not been for the kindness of Boaz. She was an immigrant from a despised country. Times had been very rough in Bethlehem and all of Judea, food was scarce because of the recent famine.

Even today, we have attitudes about immigrants coming into our country and taking our jobs, don't we? Times haven't changed too much in thousands of years. Ruth may well have been treated with disrespect or even with violence. At the very least she could have been cast out of the fields, not given the chance to glean from the harvest.

The laws actually were written that a certain amount of grain should be left, and not picked, so that the poor could have a share. But that didn't necessarily apply to a foreigner.

Ruth was brave, wasn't she? She had left her own country where she probably would not have had much opportunity there as a widow. But she was really taking a risk by moving to a new country in order to help her mother-in-law, whom she loved.

Boaz made a wish for her, because of her commendable, selfless behavior. He said, “May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!”

And Ruth responded back, saying: ‘May I continue to find favor in *your* sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants.’

Sounds sweet, doesn't it? But it's kind of like Ruth is saying it's all good for you to wish that the Lord would show me a reward, but what I especially need is to continue have favor in *your* sight, Mr. Boaz – because *you* can give me food and protection.

It's like Scripture says in James 2:14-17: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and

lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill’, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

It seems like maybe Ruth was hoping to continue finding favor and help from Boaz – a visible, tangible help. Of course, there is the secret that we could miss, in fact I think we often do miss – God often works behind the scenes – through other people. God works in mysterious ways, right?

We think sometimes that things that happen are by coincidence. One thing leads to another and then another and we just think things just happened – it all unfolded to work out in a certain way.

But the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, in chapter 8:28 “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”

There are so many stories we can think of – in the lives of famous – or infamous – people, but also in our own lives. I think of several things. The young 12 year old girl from Pakistan – Malala (*Malālah Yūsafzay*) – who was shot in the head by the Taliban because she was a girl going to school who had been writing in a blog, detailing her life under the Taliban.

For weeks she was in critical condition but finally recovered and has been a great activist for humanitarian rights, especially for the right to be educated. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at the young age of 17.

God worked through many people as she recovered, people who came together and condemned the Taliban who were cruel and ruthless. God worked through Malala’s tragic injury to use her in a mighty way – a way that makes a difference for so many, especially for girls who live in places where they have not had great opportunity, places where girls and women are still oppressed.

Another more recent story that was all over the news was about the 12 boys in Thailand who got stuck in that deep cave when the water started rising. People all over the world began praying for them. Navy seals came from other countries to help with the rescue – one of them lost his life. For a while, the world came together in unity to pray and hope and help 12 boys in Thailand who were bound to die in that cave.

God works through people. If we just look and stay aware, we can see God’s hand in our own lives.

On a way less dramatic or important scale, I can see God’s hand in my own life – as I’m sure you all can in yours. There have been blessings and joys, sorrows and shame, mistakes and sin; there have times when I was about as low as I could get – much of it by my own stupidity or stubbornness. And there have been great highs in my life as well.

There has been much grace, much forgiveness and many, many blessings on this journey. And when I sensed a strong nudge that God was leading me to a very unknown, new thing – seminary

– I struggled with that call. How could God call me to ministry? How could I be used as a pastor?

We have been in many places and different types of ministries. But now, at the ripe old age of -
**** - I look back and see that all those experiences and journeys and joys and sorrows – all of them make up who I am today. Some of it is cause to rejoice and some of it – well, let's just say God isn't finished with me yet.

But its true for all of you. All the good things you do in your life comes from God working all things together for good – for his purpose.

Ruth didn't see it at the moment with Boaz – and I'm pretty sure Boaz didn't either. But oh my! God had a hand in that relationship and some amazing things happened that affect us still today.

Ruth went home that evening to Naomi, taking her roasted grain for Naomi to fill up on. She told her all about the day and the abundance of gathering and gleaning. And she told Naomi about Boaz and his great kindness.

And it dawned on Naomi that Boaz was kin to her husband. Close kin actually. And Naomi started realizing that perhaps God had not abandoned her after all. She began to change from having despair to hope.

In a strange land, where immigrants are judged, Ruth, the foreigner found mercy and kindness - hospitality, protection, provision, and hope.

Luke says: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

God is merciful. He showered mercy, forgiveness and blessings on his children, especially shown through his Son, our Savior, Jesus.

Boaz was this merciful person – the one God used for Ruth and Naomi – to receive mercy and blessings.

And we – yes even we – have been given all these things and we are being used to go out from here – out into the community and the world and do the same. To show mercy, forgiveness, hospitality, protection, shelter – to others, as God has given to us all.

Next week, we will continue the rest of the story and we will finally see how the providence of God was at work in the young foreign woman named Ruth and in the kind man named Boaz. And, we will finally see the joyful transformation of a woman who had changed her name to Mara – meaning bitter – back to her original name, Naomi- which means sweetness.

Stay tuned for the rest of the story.

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