

Gleaning with Hope and Courage

August series: *The Book of Ruth – Full, Empty, Full*

Ruth 2 (selected verses)

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“Each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that just closed, turn around- and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our soul.”

Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*

There is good planning.

There are dreams and goals that we may work toward.

And there are sudden changes, crises, and losses that mean some doors close.

As we continue in our exploration of book of Ruth, some doors have closed. Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth have come back to Bethlehem because many doors have closed. They are desperate for food and stability. Ruth is a Moabite – a foreigner of an enemy tribe and Naomi is a Jewish widow back in her Jewish community, but feeling adrift.

At the end of chapter one, a door that is cracked open is that it is barley season following a season of drought and famine. Naomi had left Bethlehem with a full life – a husband and two sons. But she has returned empty – a widow and grieving mother since both of her sons died while they were in Moab. Although her daughter-in-law Ruth has clung to her and is devoted to her in *hesed*, Naomi is vulnerable, sad, angry at God and isolated.

I will share passages of second chapter of Ruth as the curtain opens on the second act of this play. I have found the commentary of my Hebrew Bible professor, Dr. Johanna Bos, invaluable.

1 Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. 2 And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter."

Ruth is loyal and devoted to Naomi. This devotion is an aspect of *Hesed*, a theme throughout the book of Ruth. And an aspect of biblical *shalom*. Ruth has established community, a relationship with Naomi by showing her devotion and belonging, even though Naomi was not willing to accept this gift of comfort and presence.

Naomi was prominent in Chapter 1. Now the focus is on Ruth in chapter 2. She must now show in action the devotion she showed in words in chapter 1. It is not sufficient to speak of

community. Community must be lived. Community is not a given. We create a sense of community, of belonging, with people who may share our spiritual roots and yet are diverse in other ways. Think of the people who have walked beside you in a life-giving community as Ruth did with Naomi.

Ruth knows she and Naomi need food or they will starve. She decides to take action. It does take some courage since she is a Moabite. She has heard that widows and the poor can glean in the fields so she decides to go. This is a way the community provides for each person, regardless of status. Devotion to each other's welfare. There are parts of the Torah that refer to gleaning (Deut. 24:19). The storyteller uses the phrase – Ruth hopes to find “someone in whose eyes I find favor.” Naomi's response is curt – “Go.” And notice a shift – Go – “my daughter.” More endearing than her full relationship – daughter-in-law. A shift toward hope.

3 So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

“As it happened” - this phrase or another translation “As luck would have it” – is intended to evoke a smile or chuckle from the listener and reader. Luck? Coincidence? We as readers know that luck is not in charge of these characters. The book of Ruth does not mention major interventions of God in the story or moments when the Holy One speaks. The Holy One is devoted to the Hebrew people and the world. *Hesed* – steadfast love – The steadfast love of God never ceases. So the story reflects an unfolding of hope and new life – redemption in the midst of death and loss. Maybe we can look back on our own life stories and see ways the Spirit helped us take a new path, nudged us, opened our eyes and hearts.

Boaz sees a young woman gleaning in his field. He asks who she is. His workers tell him about Ruth – she is a Moabite, she is devoted to Naomi, she has been on her feet all day never resting. She asks to continue gleaning in his fields. Boaz is moved by Ruth's *hesed*. He instructs his workers to make sure no men bother her. She speaks to him.

10 Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" 11 But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 12 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!"

He recognizes her *hesed* and praises her for it. And such a beautiful image of the Holy One – like a mother bird who protects her young under her wing. Maybe that is an image we need sometimes – under Divine wings, held close, not alone, beloved. This brave Moabite woman is

seen and blessed and appreciated by Boaz, a Jewish leader in his community. Boundaries crossed. God of all people. At meal time Boaz wants to be sure Ruth has more than enough to eat. From empty to full and overflowing.

The final section is parallel to the opening verses of the chapter and at the same time contrasts with them. A conversation between Ruth and Naomi. In the beginning Ruth takes the initiative and Naomi has a brief response. At the close of this chapter, Naomi takes the initiative and speaks volumes. In verse 3 – She went... came... gleaned. Three verbs follow each other quickly showing Ruth's industrious activity.

17 So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. 18 She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. 19 Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said. 20 "The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers."

The text says Ruth gathered "an ephah" which is between 30-50 pounds. This causes Naomi to become as eloquent in praise as she once was in bitterness. She now offers blessings and feels blessed by God who has not forsaken her. Words for gleaning and harvest point to abundance.

Relationships are highlighted. Naomi reveals that Boaz has a special role in the family and community. "Kinsman," "relative," "redeemer" are words that play a prelude on the positive turn of events to come when the emptiness of Naomi and Ruth will be filled. And the storyteller uses descriptions and words from Naomi to show a shift. Now Ruth is not the Moabite. She is daughter, daughter in law. Ruth is dependent on the good will of Boaz and she knows she is a foreigner. Being noticed is necessary for survival.

Boaz goes out of his way in his kindness and generosity toward Ruth. But there is more to come. Being a redeemer was a role with broad responsibility. Redemption is one of the most important theological concepts in this story. Redemption points to the responsibility people have for one another. Redeemers are people appointed to take care of people who cannot care for or provide for themselves. Passages in Leviticus and Numbers describe this in detail. There are formal ways for this process of redemption to be recognized by the person and community. As Prof. Bos noted, men were always the redeemers in Hebrew patriarchal society. In this story, Ruth functions as a redeemer for Naomi. And the Hebrew people applied the concepts of redemption to God. Humans are expected to cooperate with God's grace and provision.

God does not speak from burning bushes in this book; nor does God divide the sea. Instead, God acts through circumstance, and through the faithfulness of ordinary human beings. God's *hesed* is embodied in human action. Boaz praises Ruth for her loyalty to her mother-in-law (2:11) and then enacts through his generosity the blessings of God that he calls down upon her: "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" (Ruth 2:11-12). (2)

Naomi sees the astonishing amount of barley that Ruth has gleaned (something like 30 pounds), and finds out that it is Boaz who has helped Ruth. And it is then that Naomi begins to move from despair to hope. She recognizes in this turn of events the hand of God and she is quick to name God as the source of blessing: "Blessed be he [Boaz] by the LORD, whose kindness (*hesed*) has not forsaken the living or the dead!" (Ruth 2:20).

The tide is turning. Emptiness is being filled. Hope is born. And it is an older widow (one who has seen more than her share of sorrow) who recognizes the hand of God in these seemingly happenstance circumstances. When we are praying for one another, when we seek to surround a person or circumstance, sometimes we can recognize the Holy moving. There is a weaving together of human initiative and threads of the Spirit.

Ruth takes the initiative to provide for the household and suggests that she go gleaning. Naomi has a relative in town named Boaz. The text says that by chance Ruth ended up in Boaz' field. Hmmmm. Maybe Naomi wanted Ruth to find a husband and pointed her in the direction of that third field outside of town.

Sending young women into fields where they are likely to find men to marry is something I know about. When I was serving my first church in Bloomington, Indiana, I had a Naomi in my life named Louise who set up me up on a blind date with a pastor who was serving churches in the corn fields of southern Indiana. I am so glad she did. God worked in mysterious ways in my life and in Ruth's life. My story has a happy ending. In the next two weeks we will find out if Ruth's does.

I worry that our culture's preoccupation with selfies and hate of "the other" and drawing lines in the sand keep fraying the fabric of our world. And yet, like Naomi, I have hope because there are people like Ruth who commit to help and hope.

How will we demonstrate *hesed* this week as individuals and as a church? I see it every week. I am grateful for the ways we seek to build Beloved Community. It matters. Amen.

1) Dr. Johanna W.H. Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands*, Paperback Edition, United Methodist Church, 1987, pages 4, 15-19

2) <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-ruth-week-2-of-4/commentary-on-ruth-21-23>