

## Thoughts and Prayers are Not Enough (Ruth#3)

July 3, 2016

Ruth 2:8-23; James 2:14-17

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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Our story began with a famine that drove a couple named Elimilech and Naomi from their home in Judah into the land of Moab. While there, the couple's two sons each married Moabite women. Elimilech died in Moab, as did both of the couple's children. Grief-stricken, Naomi hears that there may be food once again in Judah and seeks to return, urging her daughters-in-law to remain in their own country. Orpah does as she is told, but Ruth clings to her mother in law and accompanies her to Bethlehem, where she discovers how tough life can be for a poor, hungry, female refugee.



<sup>1</sup>Determined to keep her promise, however, Ruth doubles down on her efforts to care for her mother in law by engaging in the ancient, if demeaning, task of gleaning. She joins a line of destitute women who follow the farmhands through the fields, picking up anything that is edible in the hopes that it will be enough to sustain them or their families. It is back-breaking, humiliating work...but it keeps her alive –

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<sup>1</sup> *Whither Thou Goest*, Sandy Freckleton Gagon (contemporary)

or, I should say, it kept her alive through the end of last week's scripture reading. What about today? What's next in our story?

The owner of the field, a man named Boaz, sees Ruth working with the gleaners and for whatever reason, he congratulates her for working so hard. She's done so well, in fact, that by the end of the day, she is able to collect about 3/5 of a bushel – five or six gallons – of grain. She takes this home to celebrate with Naomi and thanks God for the provision of the day.

After he speaks with Ruth, Boaz pulls the foreman aside and asks him sternly, "What is wrong here, Zadok? Why are we losing so much of our product? Can't your men be a little more careful as they bring in the crop?"

Frustrated, Boaz goes out that very evening and spends a few thousand shekels buying one of those new, efficient harvesting combines he's been reading about. After all, he reasons to himself, it's only good business sense to cut down on the wasted crops. If he can increase the yield per acre, he'll have a higher profit margin, and with more profit, he'll be able to do more work with the local charities, right? The more grain Boaz puts into his silos, the better able he'll be to help some of

the deserving poor who have become so common in Bethlehem.



<sup>2</sup>So the next day, Ruth shows up, ready to glean again, and there's Boaz with a nice bottle of chilled water to give to her as she begins her gleaning. He encourages her to admire his new harvesting technology, and says, "Go ahead – help yourself to anything that's left over!"

Ruth does as she did the previous day, but finds that Boaz was absolutely correct about the harvesting combine – in spite of the fact that she works two hours longer, she comes away with less than half the grain she was able to get the day before. As the dusk settles on the Bethlehem sky, she turns for home, passing Boaz along the way, who shouts, "Ruth! Glad to see you! You've been in my thoughts and prayers today!"

The third day seemed to dawn even earlier, and Ruth was so weary that she got to the field half an hour later. By the time she arrived, the entire field had been mown down and other gleaners were out. She crouched in that blazing sun for seven hours and still only managed to find a cup and a half of barley to take home. She was frustrated and embarrassed by

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<sup>2</sup> *Ruth Gleaning*, Marc Chagall (1960)

the thought of appearing before Naomi with such a pitiful offering.

As she sat and contemplated her future, Boaz came upon her and offered her a water bottle. When he saw that she was discouraged, he invited her to apply to his foundation for assistance. All she had to do, Boaz explained, was to stop by on the second Tuesday of the month with the appropriate identification and proof of need, and his people would be more than happy to consider her request for assistance. He then gave Ruth a little leaflet describing his charitable enterprise, on the back of which was printed a lovely prayer asking God to bless the poor. Ruth, of course, thanked him profusely and started for Naomi's home, wondering what kind of recipe she could find that would stretch twelve ounces of barley into a day's meal for two adults... but thrilled by the thought that she was included in Boaz's thoughts and prayers. She went home exhausted, but happy.

Nope. Nope.

Nope. I can't do it. You know that is not what happened. You know, I hope, that is not the narrative that is found in the Scripture.



<sup>3</sup>What Katie read for you was a lot different than that, wasn't it? You heard a story of a wealthy man who noticed the striving and difficulty of a poor widow and who went out of his way to encourage her; a man who, in fact, made it easier for this woman to sustain herself and her family by embracing a pattern of behavior that affected his personal bottom line negatively. You heard how Boaz understood Ruth's presence in his community to be a means by which she was seeking the shelter that God, through his people, provides to those who are vulnerable. You heard how Boaz ensured that Ruth's experience of seeking to care for her family was safer and more effective as he changed the ground rules for gleaners in his fields.

You know what happened. And you know that the alternate reality I tried to paint in the beginning of this message was a lie. The scenario I described is neither what actually happened nor what ought to have happened. So what is our take-away from this part of Ruth's story? What do we see, and what can we do? Some observations...



<sup>4</sup>The world can be a dangerous place. If

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*Boaz*, Joseph Anton Koch (1823-25)  
nily, Iraq, 2014 (Reuters)

the Book of Ruth teaches us anything, this is surely something we've got to remember. Economies fail, crops get parched, factories close, people we love die. And if all of that isn't bad enough, we've got to remember that when we are down and out, people will try to take advantage of us. Did you hear Boaz telling Ruth to stay close to the people that he trusted, and not to venture into other fields? Boaz knows the dangers that face young vulnerable women who have to take calculated risks with their own dignity and personal safety simply to survive in a world filled with predators. Nothing in our story minimizes the harshness of Ruth's struggle or the dangers that she encounters with regularity.

And, as we mentioned last week, we each have an obligation to do what we can to take responsibility for ourselves in a broken and fearful world. When Ruth and Naomi show up in Bethlehem, they've got to develop and implement a plan for their survival. Gleaning, while far from attractive, provides these women with the opportunity to sustain themselves even as they hope and pray for something better to come along.



<sup>5</sup>As we consider the other participants in today's

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Richard McBee (2001).

chapter, we see another truth emerging: those who have resources do well to employ them in order to serve and support the weak and the marginalized. As we've noted, Boaz takes the opportunity to make sure that he's not wringing every last cent from the ground he's been given, but rather allowing that acreage to become a blessing in the lives of those who are less fortunate. Additionally, he uses his "male privilege" to create safe space for a vulnerable female refugee, literally surrounding her with people who will see to her personal safety.

While he doesn't say so explicitly, there seems to be a strong connection in Boaz's mind between the sovereignty of God and God's care for the world and Boaz's call to use the assets at his disposal as a part of God's care for the world. Moreover, one can read in Boaz's behavior and conversation the notion that he perceives this kind of partnership in the Divine purpose to be a gift that he's received, and he goes above and beyond in his efforts to share what he's been given. Boaz knows the core truth of scripture as contained in Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's (not mine) and everything in it; the world, and all who live in it." Whatever Boaz has, he's been given by the One who truly has the right of ownership.

Similarly, how would it be if we each spent a few hours this holiday weekend taking inventory of the gifts that we have received and looking for ways that we might channel those gifts so that they reflect God's blessings in the world around us. Our culture is busily training us to see all the things that we do not have, all the places where our neighbors have it better than we do, or how someone else is getting ahead of us. The perspective of faith, I believe, calls us to acknowledge our gifts and strengths and to employ them in such a way as to become a blessing to someone else.



<sup>6</sup>And because we live in a dangerous world that is too often filled with toxicity, we do well, as a community, to create and dwell within structures that facilitate the loving of our neighbor. There is a sentiment that has found favor with a large number of religious people that the only meaningful charity and assistance comes as a result of individual action and autonomous choice. I've heard some people speak against a food stamp program, for instance, because "the government shouldn't get involved in feeding people, it should be up to the individuals to care for their neighbors."

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<sup>6</sup> *Boaz and Ruth*, Gustave Dore (1900)

Now while I'm not here to advocate for a so-called "nanny state", especially on Independence Day, I think it is worth noting that the practice of gleaning wasn't Boaz's idea. The idea of refusing to wring every ounce of productivity from your land specifically so that the poor and disenfranchised might benefit from it was at least a societal norm and civic expectation. Boaz and his fellow landowners were following laws instructing them to leave sustenance for the poor – they weren't just being nice or extra faithful.

In the same way, I believe it behooves us to create some sort of a societal "safety net" that allows the most vulnerable to receive some of the benefit of life in the richest society the world has ever known. I'm more than happy to share a sandwich with a friend who I know is hungry. If my neighbor needs help, I can see that and will offer it. But the problem is that just as Ruth was unknown to Boaz, so many of the people in our world who are most at risk are not my friends. I don't know who they are. But they are my neighbors. And so I appreciate being able to contribute towards some sort of structure that allows the marginalized to receive help when they need it that does not depend on me knowing who they are.

This is, as I've mentioned, Independence Day. Take some time to reflect on what it means for you to have participated in and, most likely, grown up in this land of abundance. When you hear the fireworks in the next few days, get down on your knees and thank God that you get to hear explosions as celebration, and not as bombs dropping on your home or invaders coming to wreak havoc. We live in a place that has received a great many blessings, and we ought to acknowledge that.

And at the same time, ask yourself, where are the Ruths and Naomis in your world? What will you do to extend these privileges and benefits to your neighbors – especially the neighbors whom you do not know personally?

I promised you when we started the Book of Ruth that it was a love story with a happy ending, and we're moving toward that ending. But today, let's not ignore this crucial part of the middle, which teaches us that we are, by God's grace, bound together. We are connected. And we have the responsibility to care for and to seek God's best for the other, even when the other is a stranger, a refugee, a person of poverty. Let us, this day, commit to giving thanks for where we are, and who we are with, and what we have been given... and

let us move beyond "thoughts and prayers" to create a world wherein it is normative to share our gifts with those for whom they seem to be out of reach. Thanks be to God, Amen!