

Ruth 2

Last Sunday we began by saying that there is much in this story for us in our weakness. This morning there is much for us in our strength.

As we begin chapter two, there are two childless widows living in Bethlehem.

One is old, likely in her early forties, which was just about all the life they expected at that time. She is paralyzed by grief, she is bitter, she tells anyone that the Lord's hand has been against her. She will not answer to her name, 'Naomi' or 'Pleasant', but insists that people call her Mara, 'bitter' because that is what she is.

The other widow is her daughter-in-law, Ruth. She is much younger, but she is a stranger in these parts. She is un-connected, unfamiliar, she does not know her way around, she does not know who is who or what is what.

The story is driven forward by hunger. The two women need to eat. It seems clear by the end of chapter 2 that there is no food in the house.

And there is danger. A young, unconnected woman out in the world is a woman at risk. When Miranda S. lived in a village in Senegal, she was 'adopted' by several families. That was more than a courtesy. It meant that she could go out and about in the community without being harassed because she belonged to those families.

This story takes place when, 'everyone did what was right in their own eyes'. Listen for concern about Ruth being safe.

Let's listen to this chapter: **Read Ruth 2**

The narrator is a name dropper and just happens to mention that Naomi has a relative, named 'Boaz'. His name means 'strength', like 'military strength'.

Here is what we learn about Boaz in this chapter:

He is **pious**: The first words we hear him say? 'the Lord be with you'. His workers know the answer, and they respond, 'the Lord bless you!'

He says to Ruth, "May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have taken refuge."

He is **involved**: Boaz is not hanging out in a cabana in Bethlehem. He comes out to his fields to see what's going on.

He is **aware**: He sees things and notices people. His workers, even the gleaners are not strangers to him.

He is **wise** to the dangers for young women at work in the fields and he is concerned for Ruth's safety and well-being: He tells her to stay in his field, and to know that he has told the men not to touch her. Whenever she is thirsty there is water in the water jars.

He is **connected** in his community: All that Ruth has done for Naomi and the risk that she has taken has been reported to him.

He is **kind**: He tells his workers: "Even if she gleanes like they do in Moab and gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her, but leave some extra lying on the ground for her to pick up."

He is **hospitable and generous**: She has no food with her and you can't eat grain right off the ground. At lunch time he invites her to come and eat with him and the workers. There is more than she can finish.

He is **unafraid to use his strength**: He gives commands, he gives directions and he knows that they will be followed.

What do we know of Ruth?

She is **pious**: The first words we hear her speak, back in chapter one, are words of commitment, faithfulness and trust. She may have no background with God or his people, but she is committed to follow the Lord and stick with Naomi.

She is **courageous**: She has dared to leave her parents, her family, her people and her gods to go to a new place where she is a stranger. Boaz respects that.

She is **respectful**: To Naomi, 'please let me go and glean in the fields'. To the foreman, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.'

To Boaz, she bows with her face to the ground. This part is pretty cultural. But the message is clear. Ruth respects the people around her. (part of her wisdom)

She is **enterprising and hard working**. It is her initiative that gets her out of the door and into the fields. The foreman tells Boaz that Ruth has worked all morning and had just a short break in the shelter.

She is **thoughtful**, she saves food for Naomi.

She is **kind**. Naomi knows that most of all.

Did I miss anything about Boaz or Ruth that you have noticed about them?

What about God?

The story teller drops Naomi's husband's name right at the beginning of the story. 'My God is King'. But God has not seemed like much of a king in that first chapter. We can

understand Naomi's bitterness. There was no food at home, so she, her husband and two boys went to Moab where there was food. Ten years later, she is a widow and both boys are dead too.

The situation is terrible. Naomi has given up on God. She is flat out bitter. When her daughter-in-law asks permission to go and glean, she shrugs her shoulders and says, 'go ahead'. 'Whatever'.

Ruth goes off to glean.... **'as it turned out'** she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz who was from the clan of 'my God is King'.

How did that happen?

How did it happen that Ruth went up hill instead of down, left instead of right, on this side of the stream instead of that side and ended up in Boaz' part of the communal grain field?

How does it 'just so happen' in our own lives? We meet people who change us. Things happen for good, or for terrible and later we come to see that somehow God is involved, guiding and directing the events of our stories. The catechism says it with the bluntness of the catechism, 'all things come to us not by chance, but from his fatherly hand'. That has been hard to believe since last Sunday evening, but it has also been comforting. The Bible tells us that we do not live in a random, out of control universe, but that we live in joy and in sorrow in God's world and in his love. God is the God of 'it just so happened'.

And there is this:

. Ruth comes home with enough grain for them to both eat for a week, and food for Naomi's evening meal. The owner of the field is Boaz!

Naomi begins to come back to life.

But what she says can be read two ways.

Listen: “May he be blessed of the Lord who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead”. (ASV)

The first part is clear. “May he be blessed of the Lord”. That refers to Boaz. May Boaz be blessed of the Lord.

The second part is wonderfully unclear.

“...who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead”.

Who has not withdrawn his kindness? Boaz, or the Lord?

If we hold this mystery together we may come to this:

The Lord is at work in the kindness of rugged, reliable, strong Boaz. When we use our strength to protect, our power to defend, our influence to show compassion, kindness, and hospitality... **the Lord is at work** to protect, to defend, to show compassion, consideration and hospitality.

We are made in the image of God. We are God's agents, his representatives, his field workers. God acts through people who honour him, who are faithful, who are courageous. And through this kindness the faith of the Maras comes back to life.

(Made with strength, Holy Spirit of power.... (too often use it in frustration)

Boaz and Ruth help us to live up to our calling of using our strength not to grasp, not to harm, not to take advantage of, but to live our strength in the way of Jesus.

This is a special challenge to those of us who are leaders in this church, as well as to us who are parents. It is a challenge to all of us to use the strength God has given us to love and to serve.

The call here is to be:

Pious: Personally honouring, serving and obeying Jesus Christ.

Wise: Don't try to do too many things. Don't do the work that belongs to others.

Faithful: Do what you commit to doing.

Kind and considerate: Look to and think of the needs of the congregation and of each other and your family.

Love the Lord with all your strength!

The Lord be gracious to you.

The Lord be gracious to me.

And all God's people said, 'Amen'.