



Ruth

Week 3

Lori Lampert - 02/20/2022

On one of the trips Ben and I have made to Madison, Wisconsin over the years to visit his relatives, I noticed something for the first time. Almost all of the streets we drove on had bike lanes.

In neighborhoods, around the University of Wisconsin which abuts downtown, and on busy four-lane roads were these clearly marked bike lanes. The urban planners of Madison had obviously paid a lot of attention to the needs of those who would travel by bicycles. And, considering the Wisconsin winters that might narrow the months of this kind of traveling, I was really impressed.

Rather than small signs that reminded the driver of a car or truck to share the road or, worse yet, a brief passage in some manual read to get a license long ago, the city created a safe space for those most vulnerable on the road.

Depending on the year and statistics used, Madison was most often in the top 20 for bike friendly cities in the US. It tied first for cities with the lowest bike related fatalities even though they are also among the top 5 for number of people who bike to work. The city was built intentionally with the bike rider in mind.

Now, you may not know this about me, but I'll bet you could guess, I haven't ridden a bike in about 15 years. Unlike some of you who are avid bike riders, I'm not. And that last time for me was the time I signed Ben and I up for an "easy" mountain biking ride on a vacation. After my third or fourth spill, when I learned why helmets are required, I also learned that for me it is a fallacy that something easy is "just like riding a bike." We enjoyed a nice hike instead.

As we have moved through the book of Ruth these past few weeks, I've been thinking a lot about the importance of making room for the most vulnerable. I've been wondering about the importance of intentionally making choices for the sake of someone else. And how you and I might do well in this world to create space so that others might not just survive, but thrive.

If you have missed the past two weeks, all of our worship services can be accessed on our YouTube channel. And I want to remind you to find the time each week to read the book of Ruth for yourself. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you. There is so much more to learn than I will ever be able to mention in the four weeks we are spending in this ancient, wonderful book.

Let me remind you of where we are right now. Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, have traveled to Bethlehem from Moab. Naomi has come home after years away and the death of her husband and two sons.

Ruth has chosen *Hesed*, a gift of love and grace she is giving to bitter, barren, bereaved Naomi. Ruth leaves Moab, her home, and is aligning her life with Naomi even though Ruth is from a land despised by the people of Judah with no promise of acceptance.

The last words of Ruth, chapter 1, are important:

²² And so Naomi was back, and Ruth the foreigner with her, back from the country of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The barley harvest. So much has changed in the years since Naomi left Bethlehem. Then, there was a famine driving her family to Moab. And now there is an abundance of barley once again. Then, Naomi was married to Elimelech who owned land, a woman under the care and protection of his family. Now she is widowed, poor, and with her is a foreigner in the land.

Yet, remember this is a story about God. And from the time they were freed from slavery in Egypt, hundreds of years before, God has given his people an intentional plan to care for the most vulnerable among them. God is working throughout these 85 verses in the book of Ruth to redeem what has been lost, to expand the understanding of God's greatest gift of *hesed*. Now we meet Boaz, whose name means "strength is within him."

Starting with verse 1 in chapter two, we read these words:

¹ It so happened that Naomi had a relative by marriage, a man prominent and rich, connected with Elimelech's family. His name was Boaz. ² One day Ruth, the Moabite foreigner, said to Naomi, "I'm going to work; I'm going out to glean among the sheaves, following after some harvester who will treat me kindly."

Glean among the sheaves. Gleaning is collecting what remains or has been dropped by the harvesters. This is a way, a plan, God has given for those who have much to share with those who have little. From the time of Moses, God made provisions for those who would be his people to create space in their abundance for those who would be considered on the lowest rung of the

ladder. God wants those who have much to share, to extend *hesed* to those who could easily be ignored, forgotten, cast aside.

God gives to Moses and those who would come after him these words of law found in Leviticus:

Leviticus 19:9-10

“When you harvest your land, don’t harvest right up to the edges of your field or gather the gleanings from the harvest. Don’t strip your vineyard bare or go back and pick up the fallen grapes. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am God, your God.

The people of God are to make sure there is food for those who are hungry. Ruth, the poor and the foreigner, has learned of this provision from the God of Naomi, the God she has chosen to follow. Ruth, who has demonstrated *hesed* by aligning her life with Naomi's, goes to the field to glean.

Remember, she is very vulnerable in this patriarchal culture. Being without a father or a husband, Ruth has no protection. Being a foreigner from the despised region of Moab, Ruth has no stature in the community. Yet, in this story we are given the opportunity to learn just how deep and wide is God’s love, God’s grace, God’s *hesed*.

Ruth goes to glean in the fields of Boaz, a well-known older man in Bethlehem who follows the laws of God. Boaz does not take his workers for granted nor does he sit in a room somewhere waiting for the benefits of wealth to come to him. He walks among his workers, he interacts with them.

Boaz even notices the gleaners, those who have no land of their own, those who are dependent on his generosity, those others would ignore. He sees Ruth in his field and asks about her. His foreman tells Boaz her remarkable

story of *hesed*. And it is important for us to see in the recounting of her tale, that the good Ruth has done is following her. It has not been forgotten by God, and it will be told through the ages in God's Holy Scripture. Now it is Boaz's turn to demonstrate to all who will read these words another picture of *hesed*, grace.

⁸⁻⁹ Then Boaz spoke to Ruth: "Listen, my daughter. From now on don't go to any other field to glean—stay right here in this one. And stay close to my young women. Watch where they are harvesting and follow them. And don't worry about a thing; I've given orders to my servants not to harass you. When you get thirsty, feel free to go and drink from the water buckets that the servants have filled."

¹⁰ She dropped to her knees, then bowed her face to the ground. "How does this happen that you should pick me out and treat me so kindly—*me*, a foreigner?"

¹¹⁻¹² Boaz answered her, "I've heard all about you—heard about the way you treated your mother-in-law after the death of her husband, and how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and have come to live among a bunch of total strangers.

God reward you well for what you've done—and with a generous bonus besides from God, to whom you've come seeking protection under his wings."

¹³ She said, "Oh sir, such grace, such kindness—I don't deserve it. You've touched my heart, treated me like one of your own. And I don't even belong here!"

It's not Ruth's youth, or her beauty, that draws the attention of Boaz. He doesn't know yet that they are related through her marriage to a son of

Elimelech and that he might have some responsibility for her. Boaz is not asking anything in return. He only knows what God has taught him.

Boaz is a righteous man. He seeks to follow God. He is looking out for the most vulnerable among those in his field. He is providing a way for Ruth to be safe. He is creating a lane, a space for her to do more than just barely make it through another day, to only escape by the skin of her teeth, dodging the dangers all around her. Boaz is making a way for Ruth to do more than just survive but to thrive.

And centuries later Jesus, the Son of God, will tell us to do the same. Those who are seeking to follow God, to live righteously in the world must provide for those most vulnerable. In the gospel of Matthew are the words, the intentional plan given to us by Jesus. Here we learn that this is how the King will judge his people. Not by the power and wealth they have accumulated. Not by what they have but by what they do with what they have. From Matthew 25, I am reading from The Message :

³⁴⁻³⁶ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why: I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.’

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

You and I need an intentional plan to provide for someone overlooked or ignored. They are Ruth. They are Naomi. They are Jesus. They could be any of us at one time or another.

Like the urban planners of Madison, Wisconsin, before we build one more street to hold our cars, to drive our trucks, to get us from one place to another, we need to think carefully about who we are excluding. Those who do not fit in our preconceived notion of how everyone is to travel. Those who are not the majority with the loudest voices yet deserve the same safety, same freedom, same ability to provide for themselves as we all do—as children of the most high God—who inhabit this small planet.

I invite you to create the margins and spaces in your lives so that others on the road of life with you have the opportunity to more than survive, thrive. It won't take you long if you choose to do so, to see the other travelers and respond. It means doing as Boaz did and noticing those around you.

The prayer list we have at the church is not just a list of names, it is people who are ill, dealing with mental and physical difficulties, struggling with addictions, coping with grief. It is full of stories of real people who need your prayers and love and hesed. And yet that is just the tip of what is going on in this world, in our world.

The hungry and thirsty are as close as Crosslines Food Pantry, Rare Breed services for vulnerable youth. The unsheltered are as close as just outside the doors of The Downtown Church, Veterans Coming home center, Safe to sleep, and other community shelters that open for the coldest of nights.

The naked, well maybe they are not naked, but there are children in need of socks, underwear, and shoes, and they are as close as your neighborhood school. Those in prison abound in our society and are perhaps the most hidden. Good Dads, an organization is working with Victory Mission and other agencies to find solutions for those coming out of jail to more than

survive, thrive. And this is just the tip of what is going on in our community and the world.

Sometime this week would you take time to become a person, a family who intentionally plans to provide for others? In some way choosing to keep your eyes and ears open to those who are on the road with you? Keep margins for people to glean from you.

And remember Ruth, if this is a season in your life where you find yourself one who must glean. Let me hear from you. The Downtown Church has resources and the ability to help because of the many Boaz's in our church family, for we have intentionally created margin so that we can participate in God's *hesed*.

Let's pray.

Lord God, We move through life so quickly. We often feel that the purpose is to just get from one place to another, one day to the next. Slow us down, Lord. Open our eyes to the many traveling this road with us. Show us the needs we too easily ignore, the gleaners we don't see, the many dodging the traffic we have created just wanting to be safe on the journey. May we respond with a plan to provide room enough for all to thrive. In Jesus' Name we pray, Amen.