

Date: 11/7/21

Strong Women, Strong Choices

Texts: **Ruth 2: 1-11; Ruth 3: 1-1; Ruth 4 13-17**

Last time we were talking about the beginning of the story of Ruth. It didn't even start with her, but with Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. They had left Bethlehem as refugees seeking food during a famine, and had taken up residence in Moab, one of Israel's great enemies in the region. They lived there as immigrants among their neighbors.

Elimelech soon died, we don't know how, leaving Naomi a widow with two unmarried sons. She found Moabite brides for her sons, but after ten years in Moab, both her sons died childless, leaving the widowed Naomi with two widowed daughters-in-law.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, did the sensible thing and went back to her mother's house to find another husband. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth told her mother-in-law "where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you did, I will die, and there I will be buried." And so the two widowed women set out for Bethlehem, one heading home, the other heading into life as an immigrant and a widow.

It would be difficult to overstate the dire straits these women were in. They were poor, almost destitute. There was no father, husband, or son to take care of them, an essential part of patriarchal society. They were on their own in a time and place where women on their own were constantly in danger. Our readings from today tell us what happened next. We get a sense of how poor these women are from the fact that Ruth has to go looking for food by gleaning.

So what is gleaning? Gleaning is like an ancient food pantry. The Law prohibited the owner of a field from taking every last grain in it. The corners of the field had to be left unharvested so that the poor could come in and take what was left standing. The Law also told owners not to go back over the rows of crops in their fields after the harvesters had gone through. The harvesters always dropped some sheaves on the ground by accident, or missed a spot here and there where the grain was growing. Those sheaves had to be left on the ground, and those last remaining spots left standing for the poor to come in afterwards and find something to eat.

This is what gleaning is: going after the reapers and picking up what was left behind, or going into the corners of the fields looking for the scraps that were left. The practice of gleaning placed an obligation on the landholders of the community, which was almost everyone at that time in an agricultural society, not to take the utmost profit possible from their land, but to leave some money on the table, as it were, so that the poor wouldn't starve.

The community was responsible for making sure that some of the community's resources were available to the poor and the destitute. The poor couldn't be left to starve. God's Law said so. Often the poor were widows, like Naomi and Ruth, who had no other means of support. When Ruth goes gleaning, what she finds will be her meal for the day, shared with Naomi. It's just a step up from begging, and not far from having to resort to prostitution, that other staple last resort for desperate women whom society has left behind. From time immemorial, women have been forced to do whatever it takes to survive

How dangerous this was is also shown when Boaz, the owner of the field Ruth has chosen to glean in, arrives. Boaz tells Ruth to "keep close to *my* young women" who are harvesting in the field. *His*

young women are the ones under his protection, whom no one would dare to touch. In other words, he's telling her, don't let yourself get cornered alone among the high grain stalks where something could happen. Stay with the women under my protection, for your own protection. Boaz is so worried about Ruth's safety that he goes a step further, and explicitly orders the young men not to bother her. The ancient reader knew exactly what this 'bothering' meant: the young men were likely to try to have their way with this young woman, Ruth, the Moabite, the foreigner, whom no man was looking after. A single woman in a field was a tempting target.

Historians love when we get a law or a statement like this prohibiting a certain action. You don't have to write a law against something unless someone is doing it. You don't have to tell the young men not to lay a hand on a young foreign woman in a field unless you expect that that is exactly what is going to happen. It's a real insight into the way ancient society worked, and it's extremely valuable to help us understand what's going on. It's social history through looking at what is forbidden.

So Ruth is in a desperate situation. She is exposed to hunger, and to possible sexual assault. She and Naomi are just trying to survive any way they can.

We understand this. We know that people sometimes have to resort to desperate measures to make ends meet. Back in December, 2020, the New York Post published a story about a woman who worked for an ambulance service as an EMT in New York City. She also worked a second job as a hostess in a Korean restaurant. Still unable to make ends meet, she resorted to posting what's been called "racy content" on the internet site OnlyFans. According to Rolling Stone magazine, OnlyFans is a "content subscription platform that allows influencers and content creators to monetize their content" and "is mainly used by sex workers, who post racy content on their feeds in exchange for a monthly subscriber fee." The EMT worker was quickly supported by others, who said that the real scandal was that EMT's in New York were paid so little that they had to have a second job and an OnlyFans account just to survive. Apparently what this 23 year old woman was doing was not unusual. The platform is full of people from non-sex-worker fields desperately trying to make ends meet.

Ruth and Naomi are not alone after three millennia in being forced to take risky and desperate measures to survive. After all this time, we still haven't solved this ancient problem. Fortunately for Ruth, Boaz happens to be a distant relative of Naomi's, and he has heard about Ruth's faithfulness. Perhaps this is why he is ready to protect this foreign young woman from the utter depredations of the men in his employ.

In a part we didn't hear this morning, Boaz goes further, telling his workers to let Ruth glean even among the standing sheaves. He also instructs the men to drop some of their harvest on purpose for Ruth to pick up. In this way, he shows that he is positively disposed towards Ruth and Naomi and their plight. He knows he is Naomi's kinsman and seems to understand that he has some kind of obligation towards them. What his protection will be is still up in the air. He's not a brother of Ruth's deceased husband, so he has no obligation to marry her.

From the story, it seems like Boaz at first did no more than let Ruth glean in his fields. He seemed unwilling to take the next step. So Naomi comes up with a desperate gamble. The Bible translation kind of covers up what's going on with a bunch of 'wink, wink, nudge, nudge, know what I mean' double entendres, but don't worry, I'll lay it out for you. Naomi tells Ruth to take a bath, put on perfume, dress in her best clothes and then go down to the threshing floor and hide there. Wait until Boaz has finished eating and drinking, and then go uncover his feet and lie down there. Then Boaz will tell her what to do. Sounds almost innocent, right? But the 'threshing floor' was a euphemism for the place where the prostitutes hung out, kind of like 'red light district' might be. Now, Ruth is literally going to a threshing floor, but the author of Ruth is winking at us already. Naomi tells Ruth not to let herself be known by

the man until after he's finished eating and drinking. The verb 'know' is also Bible euphemism, as in 'Adam knew his wife Eve, and then Cain was born. Another wink. She is to 'lie down' with him, which has the same double meaning as the English word 'sleep with him' has. Could be innocent, could be not. Nudge. Naomi tells her to uncover Boaz's feet. The word uncover has a similar ambiguity to our word 'strip' as in 'strip off your clothes' and is another nudge at us, and it's followed by the biggest hint of all at what is happening with the word feet. That word, dear friends, both means literal feet, and is also a euphemism like 'naughty bits'.

In plain words, Naomi's plan is: Ruth is to get all dolled up, and when Boaz is drunk after dinner, go lie down with him and uncover his privates and he'll tell her what to do next. That's the whole wink, wink, nudge, nudge of that innocent sounding passage. Like I said, it's a desperate plan.

Boaz is already asleep when Ruth comes to lie down, but he wakes up in the middle of the night. He's not sure what happened, but he knows it's scandalous, so he makes a virtue out of necessity. He tells Ruth that she has honored him by not going after a younger man, and he will honor her by marrying her. The plan worked! Naomi and Ruth have a man to protect them and are reintegrated into the community.

In this short story, Naomi and Ruth's story has taught us lessons about immigration, about taking care of the poor, about women's desperation, but also about their agency, that is, their power to try to take matters into their own hands. Without explicitly speaking about God's providence, we learn about God's providence when the field Ruth chooses to glean in happens to belong to Naomi's relative, Boaz. And we've also learned how there's much more hiding in Scripture than we ever would have imagined, wink, wink, nudge, nudge. But the story has one final twist for us: this foreign Moabite immigrant woman turns out to be the great-grandmother of King David and the Israelite royal family! Because of her, Israel gets King David, and eventually, from David's line, the world gets Jesus. Ruth even gets a mention in Matthew's genealogy of the Messiah in Matthew, chapter 1!

The book reminds us that a humble immigrant like Ruth could make a huge difference in society, as immigrants have been doing all over the world, but especially here in the United States, ever since.

By the providence of God, people move from place to place. They often start out desperately poor, but their children and their children's children get a chance to move up, to become something more. And sometimes that something more is a great king, or even the Messiah himself.

Ruth, a small book about two widows desperately trying to survive, can open our eyes to much in our own time. It can remind us to be merciful and gracious towards those who are doing disreputable and desperate things just to survive. It can remind us of our duty to protect the vulnerable from abuse and assault. It can force us to confront what it means to leave some money on the table for the use of the poor, and not to exploit every resource to the fullest extent possible for our own use. And it reminds us, too, that immigrants and their children can sometimes turn out to be the greatest Israelites of all.

So I say, thank God for this wonderful little book. May we all learn its profound lessons. Amen