

Title: Surprising grace and a hard life
Text: Ruth 2
Theme: Living faithfully
Series: Ruth #2
Prop Stmtnt: Fruitful living is faithful living

Food doesn't come from Krogers or Costco, it comes from farms. Farming is in my family. My dad is buried in a family cemetery in the middle of farmland in central Iowa. I spent part of my summers as a kid in the pigpens, barnyard and corn fields. I know the heat, the stink, and a little bit about the work. The seasonal life of farming has always had some influence on the rhythm of life as I knew it and since the Bible was written in primarily an agricultural context, farming and living come together in many passages. In a world without refrigerators, freezers grocery stores and supermarkets, farming was a matter of life and death. If you, or those around you did not farm, you did not eat. This is particularly true in the book of Ruth. In fact, in our text (chapter 2) the word "glean" occurs 12 times. Now, you do not have to have experience farming in order to understand the message of this book, but there are some aspects of it, that will help you appreciate a bit more fully, what is going on here. But, first, let's read the text.

Read text

Naomi and her husband and two sons left Bethlehem during a famine and went to Moab in order to find work and get food. There, Naomi's husband died and her two sons who had each married a woman from Moab, also died. When Naomi heard that the fields were flourishing in Bethlehem, she returned. Her one daughter-in-law, Ruth, insisted on returning with her. Chapter 1 concludes with Naomi and Ruth coming to Bethlehem and with us wondering, how is God going to take care of these two widows. A long-term famine would have made life very difficult for most of the people. Naomi and Ruth apparently find a place to live (perhaps the home she had left), but they would be living from hand to mouth. Two women, two generations, holding both grief and now a fragile vulnerability in common. What is going to happen to them?

I. **There is no such thing as luck.** (2.1-7)

In v.1 we are made told that there is a man named Boaz who is related to Naomi's husband who is described as a "worthy man. At this point we do not know the significance of this man nor the part that may play in the story. We can only assume that he will, but that remains to be seen. What we do know is that if Naomi and Ruth are going to survive, then they are going to have to eat and if they are going to eat then they have to get some food and if they are going to get some food, then they are going to have to work.

A few years ago Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert wrote a very insightful book entitled, "When Helping Hurts: How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor and yourself. These guys have years of experience in 3rd world situations and have seen how well meaning, sacrificial humanitarian efforts, relief agencies, short term missions trips have in many cases, done more damage than good. Just giving people a hand-out, while compassionate, may not be good. I read the account of a local "beggar" who was not actually poor, but played the part. He held the cardboard sign about needing food, he had the look, and sat day after day by a busy intersection.

Someone began watching him from a distance and documented the amount of tax free income he received and it was astounding. He made more money begging than he could by working. But, how are we supposed to know who really has a need and who doesn't?

In the Old Testament, God laid out a plan to help the poor in Israel. Part of that plan was a command to the landowners to not harvest all the way to the edge of their fields. The poor were then able to glean in the fields and get what they needed to be able to live. The plan was, and honestly remains great! The poor had an opportunity to have the dignity of work and be able to put food on their own table. Those who owned the fields lived with a sense of care and responsibility for those in their community who were facing difficult times. Those who were too lazy to work did not eat. So, on paper, (that is according to the Old Testament law) it was a great plan. But, this was the time of the Judges and we are all aware that Israel was for the most part, not paying a whole lot of attention to the Old Testament law. So, in order for this plan to work it required a landowner who took the law seriously and instructed his harvesters to leave some crop for the poor to glean and, of course, it required a work ethic on the part of the poor. Even then, you can imagine that if too many poor people showed up to glean in a field, chaos could easily ensue. Therefore, it sounds as if, before a poor person could glean in a field, that he or she had to gain permission from the owner or overseer of the field.

Once again, our hearts are drawn to Ruth. In spite of the fact that she is a single girl from Moab (a fact repeatedly underscored in this chapter), there are no excuses in her. She asks permission from Naomi to go out and glean in the field of someone who gives her permission to do so. The last 5 chapters of the book of Judges make us keenly aware of the kind of risk Ruth was taking. Bethlehem was not the sort of place where it was safe for a girl to walk around by herself. Naomi's response is brief but tender. "Go, my daughter." And then we come to verse 3. "So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers...." In other words, Ruth goes out in the morning, she finds reapers who are harvesting, and she sets out to follow them. Our text then says, "and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz." A literal translation of the Hebrew text would be, "and her chance chanced..." In the Hebrew language, if you want to put something into all caps and a bold font, you repeat the word, which is exactly what the author is doing here. By overemphasizing the "random luck" of Ruth, he is making it very clear that there is nothing random about this at all. God has not forgotten these women. Of all the fields that Ruth could have gone to that morning, she ended up, by God's grace in the field of Boaz. She did not know it and neither did he. But that was about to change. And result would change the world. But, I am getting ahead of the story, because we don't know that yet. All that we know is that Ruth is really putting herself out there and what we know about her, we really like. What is so attractive about Ruth? She is humble, work ethic, generous, no presumptions. She looks like Jesus to Naomi in chapter 1, and the promises that she made then, she is keeping in chapter 2. And, at the risk of being pastor obvious, need I remind you that this hard, hot work!

Later that morning, after Ruth's chance chanced her into a field belonging to Boaz,well, what do you know but "behold (as v.4 says it) Boaz came from Bethlehem." And we're like, hmm, this could be interesting, right? All that we know about Boaz is that he is a worthy man (v.1). But, look at this guy. Look at how the landowner (and presumably wealthy) treats his laborers. He initiates the greeting. He, it appears is checking on them in order to see how they are doing. He says, "The LORD be with you." This is a blessing! This is a prayer! This is a desire of this

man for the good of his workers. Here is a man who has power over others, who exercises that authority for their good. And the response of the workers is in like kind. “The LORD bless you.” What kind of a guy is this? Here is a man who cares for his employees? Here is a man who loves his workers and they love him in return? This is unusual. This is highly unusual. Now our eyebrows are raised. What we know about Ruth, we like and what we know about Boaz, we like. But, she is from Moab. He probably wouldn’t be interested.

Well, maybe. In verse 5, Boaz says to his foreman, “whose young woman is this?” She is obviously younger than he is. The servant in charge does not use her name, perhaps he does not know it, but tells Boaz that she is the young Moabite woman who came back with Naomi from Moab. He says it as if Boaz would know. 1.19 says that the “whole town was stirred” at the arrival of Naomi and Ruth. Obviously, it was so. Now, things get even more interesting because we now become privy to some conversations that tell us even more about the character of Ruth and then of Boaz. Verse 7 tells us that Ruth approached the steward and requested permission to be able to glean in the field. He goes on to tell Boaz that except for a short rest, the girl has been working diligently in the field.

Good things do not always happen to good people. Life is full of difficulties and burdens but we live with the end in view and seek to be faithful no matter what. But, is it not neat when you see something good happen to someone who is faithful? Our hearts are cheering for Ruth. We want to see God come through for her. We want her to know that following Naomi and helping Naomi and committing herself to Yahweh was good and we want her to experience the good of that now. And this Boaz guy? He sounds great! And the language of the story makes us aware that there is more coming. We don’t have to wait long.

II. **Grace will surprise you.** (2.8-23)

Verse 8 records the first direct conversation between Boaz and Ruth and talk about winning the heart of a woman, Boaz does an amazing job, but I don’t think he knows that he is doing it. Up until this point it has been Ruth the Moabite, the woman from Moab, the woman from the country of Moab and how does Boaz speak to her? He says, “Now, listen my daughter...” That is the same term of care and affection that Naomi used. Do you see this? Boaz does not treat her like an outsider; he treats her like family. Then comes his plea. Stay in this field. These men will not touch you. I have already addressed that with them. Can you believe it? Boaz has already instituted a sexual harassment policy at work. If you worked in his field, you would be safe, unless of course you wanted to attack others, then you wouldn’t last. Oh, one more thing, when you are thirsty? I know that it is customary for foreigners to draw water for us, and it is culturally expected for the women to draw the water for the men. But, here, when you are thirsty, you just go and get the water that the men have already drawn. Don’t draw your own. Drink theirs. My field. My rules. Do you see what is going on? Ruth, who surprised Naomi with grace (chesed) in chapter 1 is now surprised by it in chapter 2.

A. **Grace surprised Ruth** (through Boaz)

Look at how Ruth responds. (v.10) She is blown away! She is amazed! She is overwhelmed! She is humbled! Two things you need to see here! 1) Ruth does not expect to be rewarded for her

efforts. And 2) Because her heart to Yahweh and to Naomi is so open, she is able to identify grace in her life. In chapter 1, Naomi could not see God's grace to her. In chapter 2 Ruth couldn't miss it. Go back to verse 2. Look at the request that Ruth made to Naomi. "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor." It is a request and prayer all at once. And before the morning was over, this request had been answered in an amazing way.

Ruth, who is obviously very conscious of the fact that she is a foreigner, she has no legal standing, no protection, no one to defend her, no one to advocate for her, is blown away at the fact that Boaz appears to be completely unfazed by the fact that she is from Moab. She bows herself to the ground, and asks why he would give her so much favor?

Boaz speaks a second time to her in verses 11 and 12. What you did for your mother-in-law has been told to me. "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband...how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." At this point, Boaz seems to have run out words. He is amazed at this girl. In pouring out grace to Naomi, Ruth has surprised Boaz.

And here is why I think that grace and hesed factor so prominently in this section. Notice what Boaz says. "The LORD repay you for what you have done..." He goes on to repeat this idea. He is pointing out that Ruth has given to Naomi without expecting anything in return. Anyone who loves God is going to be warmed and encouraged when they hear stories like this. Grace has now surprised Boaz.

B. Grace surprised Boaz (through Ruth)

Now, let's pull off the road and park it for a minute, because this is way too important to blow past. Ruth does not realize that what she has done is extraordinary. Ruth lives as one who is amazed by grace, therefore, any sacrifice that she makes doesn't really feel like sacrifice, and we just love her for it. At the same time, Boaz lives as one who is also amazed by grace. Therefore, any sacrifice that he makes doesn't really feel like sacrifice to him and we love him for it.

These are the kind of people that we just want to be around. You know where I am going with this, don't you? This is a preview of what the church is called to be. Yes, yes, yes, of course we want to see Boaz and Ruth get married; but why? We want to see people who are both amazed at the gift that other is to them live out that amazement before God with others.

Look at what God has done for you. What do we deserve? I'll shoot straight with you. We deserve hell. I deserve hell. We cannot grasp how perfectly holy, how infinitely righteous, and how white-hot pure God is. I have sinned enough this morning, even in the preaching of this sermon to condemn my soul to hell for eternity. That is what I deserve. I am not being dramatic, I am telling you the truth. But, God, instead of condemning me, sent Christ to die in my place and in his death he took my condemnation. He absorbed in himself the wrath of God that should have and could have been poured out on me. He did that because he wanted to do that for me. He did not give me what I deserved. He gave me what I did not deserve. I have forgiveness. I have eternal life. I am credited with the righteousness of Christ. I am a child of God. I have been

adopted into his family. I have an inheritance that can never be taken away. I have a reservation in heaven that cannot be lost. That is amazing. And I am talking to people who have the same thing that I do and we didn't do a thing to deserve it. When you live by grace and you enjoy that grace and you live in fellowship with other people who live by that same grace and enjoy that grace, then what happens? You stop thinking about yourself, don't you? You think about others because you love God. You love God because he loved you first and your love of God is put on display by your love for others and you just want others to know how deep, how high, how wide and how long this love is.

Back to the story. Boaz blesses her in v.13. He is praying that Yahweh, like a mother bird who offers her wings of protection to her young will protect Ruth since Ruth has thrown herself at the mercy of God. Ruth responds again with profound gratitude. She has found favor and she is profoundly grateful. She cannot believe that she, an outsider is being treated with such respect and such care.

That would be enough for one day, but there's more. What Ruth said to Naomi in chapter 1 is lived out by Ruth in chapter 2. She makes promises and keeps them. Now, what Boaz says to Ruth is done by him as an example. His promise to Ruth has weight to it.

Eating with others has its own dynamics. First of all, who is going to sit where? Who is going to serve and be served? Who is going to get what? If you are the intern at work, you make the run to Taco Bell. If you are the young buck on the Landscape crew, you have to get the carry out from Coney Island. And if this is your first day on the job, you don't presume to sit next to the boss. Ruth, who is fully aware of her social status, rightfully keeps her distance. But what Boaz does next gets everyone's attention.

First, Boaz told Ruth to come and eat with the crew. She was not a hired hand. She was in the poor category. But he wanted her to be treated with respect. He wanted her with them. Dip your bread in the wine. Eating dry bread is no fun. Here, have some of this. So, Ruth sat with the reapers. Then Boaz passed her some roasted grain. He served her! He gave her food that had already been prepared for his workers. He did this! He is making sure that she is being included and he is making sure that everyone sees him doing this. This will protect her. But, again Ruth did not take advantage of this. She ate until she was full and rose to get back to work. Then Boaz tells his guys, let her follow you. In fact, keep dropping stuff so that she can pick it up a bit more easily.

So, here is Boaz, truly thankful for this girl. And she is truly thankful for him. They, without meaning to be, are an incredible gift to each other, but there is more, they are an incredible gift to Naomi.

Ruth works the rest of the day and then beats out the grain. The result is that she comes home at the end of a very long day and Naomi is blown away. (read)

C. Grace surprised Naomi (through Ruth and Boaz)

This is not what Naomi expected. Ruth brings a ridiculous amount of barley home. The two women are laughing! Naomi is laughing! I know that based on her use of the word “Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” By taking notice of Ruth that man, whoever he was, made it clear that God was taken notice of Naomi. Ruth tells her that it was Boaz, and now Naomi actually says it. In verse 20, Naomi is a changed woman. She is convinced that Yahweh is not against her. The hesed of God (translated kindness) has been poured out on Naomi. And hope has been restored.

The next day, Ruth returns to the fields, and the next, and the next, and the next. Life was not easy, but they were safe.

III. **Where is Jesus in this?**

Jesus is the hero of the Bible. It all points to him. Even here in Ruth 2, we see a picture of God’s covenant love that is poured out on an outsider. Ruth is given honor. She is given protection. She is given food. She is served. This is what Christ has done for us.