

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: *Ruth 2:1-17*

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SERMON: *Out Here in the Fields*

(Acknowledgement to Carolyn Custis James for her book, The Gospel of Ruth; and Philip DeCourcy for his podcast on the life of Ruth)

Our sermon series is called **A Page Turner** which many of you know is a phrase used to describe a book that is really hard to put down, because it's just so interesting, so compelling.

The work that God is looking to do in the world is today is also very compelling...and He is inviting you and I to join Him and play a part in carrying out His plan...His plan for your life...His plan for this church...His plan for this community, and beyond.

Even in the midst of these ordinary lives we are living, we have a chance to become a part of something much bigger than ourselves, and this is what we see taking place in the book of **Ruth**.

Last week we looked primarily at the hardships and tragedies experienced by Naomi. She was afflicted, empty and bitter...not doubting the existence of God, but convinced that He had turned His back on her. Her response was to **be brutally honest with God**, and this is how we want to be when those times come – and they do come – when we have no idea what it is that God is doing.

We also looked at the life altering decision made by Ruth somewhere on the dusty road between Moab and Bethlehem, and it causes us to recognize that when it comes to

following Jesus, there are life altering decisions that all of us must make, and the decision to **Choose Jesus and take that choice seriously** heads the list.

Our stopping point last week was at the end of chapter 1, with Naomi and Ruth arriving in Bethlehem just...

Ruth 1:22b ...as the barley harvest was beginning.

Go ahead and open up your Bible, get out your device, or follow along on the screen as we turn our attention now to the second chapter of Ruth.

The message is titled **Out Here in the Fields**, and just like last week, we'll begin by watching a short video that gives us some idea of **What's Happening** in our Scripture passage. Then we'll talk about **What We Don't Want to Miss.** Where God says "Slow down, and think more about this." And finally, I'll be asking you, **What's Your Next Step?** God is inviting you to join Him in the work that He's doing...what do you think your next step is in order for this to happen?

Let's get started and see...

1. WHAT'S HAPPENING

...now that Naomi and Ruth have arrived in Bethlehem.

VIDEO

This covers the first 17 verses of chapter two, so let's take a look at...

2. WHAT WE DON'T WANT TO MISS

So chapter two begins with a brief interruption in Naomi's story...just one verse where we are introduced to this man by the name of Boaz. We learn that he is related to Elimelech, Naomi's late husband. *(Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. 2:1)* And in addition to that, he's respected, highly thought of there in Bethlehem...a man of standing.

That introduction takes one verse, then it's back to Naomi and Ruth, who, with no husbands to provide for them, have to find a way to eat.

Ruth says that what she'll do is venture out into the fields and pick up any grain that fell by the wayside as the harvesters and the bundler's worked their way through the fields.

What she is proposing has a name, it's called...

A. Gleaning

Ever heard of it? Some of you have, many of you probably have not. Before we go any further, it's critical that we understand what "gleaning" actually is. It's origins are found in the books of the law, where God gives the Israelites these instructions:

Leviticus 19:9-10 "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. (In addition to that...) Do not go over your vineyard a second time..."

So why would God tell His people to not be thorough when harvesting their grain or picking their grapes? He's up to something, and His reasoning is found in the book of Deuteronomy where He goes into more detail: *"When you harvest your crops and forget to bring in a bundle, don't go back and get it, leave it for the foreigners, the orphans, the widows. When you beat the olives from your trees, don't go back and beat them a second time, leave the olives that remain on the trees for the foreigners, orphans and widows. When you gather grapes in the vineyard, don't glean the vines after they have been picked, leave the grapes that remain for the foreigners, orphans and widows."*

And then God gives the reason why:

Deuteronomy 24:22 "Remember you were slaves in the land of Egypt. That is why I am giving you this command."

God says, *"Remember your ancestors were once the foreigners...the outsiders. Just as I provided for your ancestors, **I'm calling you to provide for the foreigners, the orphans, the widows."***

Now this man Boaz owns a field, and he is obedient to God's law. It's clear that gleaners are welcome in his field, but there's a process involved. When harvesting a field, the hired men would go first, they would take standing grain stalks in one hand, and cut them off at the base with a sickle, then lay the cut stalks out on the ground.

The women would come next, gathering and binding the stalks into bundles that would then be carted off to another location for the kernels to be husked, separated from the stalk. Then those who were gleaning would come behind and gather up anything that fell by the wayside.

It was God's intent that those who had life stacked against them, by virtue of immigration, or loss of a father or loss of a husband, would have food to eat. God has compassion on them and seeks to meet their needs, and is asking His people, the Israelites, to do the same.

Even with God's instructions, it didn't always go as intended. There were some landowners who cut to the edges and would not allow gleaners access to their fields. Some landowners would mistreat or look to take advantage of those who were gleaning...and among the gleaners themselves, there would have been competition, and those who were the strongest and most aggressive could gain an advantage.

Years ago there was a well-known band called The Who, and one of their most popular songs opened with these words: *"Out here in the fields, I fight for my meals..."*

I think those lyrics would describe the life of a gleaner. And so it would seem that Ruth would have her work cut out for her as she arrives at this field, which just so happens to be owned by Boaz.

And as we saw in the sketch, God's fingerprints can be found all over the place here in this Scripture passage. It just so happened to be the start of the barley harvest and it just so happened that Ruth,...

Ruth 2:3b ...she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who (it just so happened) **was from the clan of Elimelech.**

At some point Boaz arrives and greets the harvesters..."The Lord be with you!" and they call back "The Lord bless you!" Boaz goes over to his foreman, and having noticed someone new in his field, he asks, **"Whose young woman is that?" (2:5b).**

We have no idea what caught his attention. Many have made it out to be a physical attraction, but we don't know. But the foreman responds by saying...

Ruth 2:6b "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi."

Remember that when Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, it caused the whole town to be stirred? Everybody in town – including Boaz – is probably aware of Naomi's story, and also probably aware of the loyalty shown by Ruth to Naomi.

And so Boaz almost certainly knows who she is. And it's at this point that the foreman informs Boaz that this woman came to him with...

B. A Bold Request

One that is highly irregular and goes beyond the foreman's authority to grant.

Ruth 2:7 "She said, 'Please let me glean and gather *among the sheaves behind the harvesters.*'"

Now at first glance it appears that all Ruth is asking for is permission to glean in this field, this is how this verse is traditionally read. But she doesn't need permission, the law permits people to come and pick up what wasn't harvested and gathered the first time through. No, what Ruth is doing is pressing the owner of the field to open his hand wider than the law requires.

We already know of her loyalty to Naomi, and she doesn't want to just pick up leftover scraps, she wants to feed her mother-in-law, and feed her well. And so she asks if she can more or less "butt in line" and glean and gather *among the sheaves and behind the*

harvesters. Not after the sheaves have been bound, bundled and carried off. *Among the sheaves.* To come along behind the harvesters where the newly cut stalks were lying there on the ground, waiting to be gathered and bundled.

I wonder if any of the men overheard this request, if what appears to be a faux-pax would have caused their jaws to drop?

This scene in the field reminded me of a funny commercial that ran many years ago for a product called Polander All Fruit, where this guy commits a faux-pax of his own during a quaint dinner party. Take a look...

VIDEO

What Ruth is requesting here could be described as a social blunder, that may have caused some of the men to drop their sickles and the women their bundles. By making this request Ruth leaving herself open to rejection and even scorn – “Just who do you think you are?” – and so she takes a sizable risk in order to provide not just for herself, but also for her mother-in-law.

But there’s even more to consider. Author Carolyn Custis James points out that Ruth...

“...is also pressing Boaz to color outside the lines of his understanding of God’s law. The letter of the law says, ‘Let them glean.’ The spirit of the law says, ‘Feed them.’ Two entirely different concepts.

I wonder if Ruth’s request would cause Boaz to wrestle with God’s intent behind His commands? Should Boaz be wrestling with, **“How big is a corner? How wide is an edge?”** *How thorough do I want my workers to be, given the fact we only have one chance to clear it?”* *What is God’s intent?*

If he is indeed wrestling with this, he hasn’t much time, as all eyes are on him, awaiting his answer. His faith and desire to please God seems to be genuine...he has just invited God to be present there in his field, for God’s presence to be with his workers.

But has this woman from Moab crossed a line? Will Boaz be content to keep the letter of the law, or will he open his hand? What we see in response to Ruth's bold request, is...

C. An Astonishing Response

Boaz begins coloring outside the lines...looking for what he can do to go above and beyond and actually exceed what Ruth has asked. He tells her...

Ruth 2:8b “My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here.”

His instructions are to follow the women, not go ahead of them, but by doing so, he's not shooting her down. Far from it. But first things first... *“I've told the men not to touch you...you'll be safe here. When you are thirsty, go and drink from the water jars the men have filled.”* She won't have to waste precious time going in search of water.

Ruth is taken aback by his kindness, and asks him *“Why?”*

Ruth 2:11a “I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law...”

His motivation doesn't seem to be infatuation. He has real respect and admiration for the kindness that Ruth has shown Naomi, and her willingness to come and live among people she did not know.

And then Boaz calls on his Lord, saying,

Ruth 2:12 “May the Lord richly repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Has anyone ever prayed a prayer of blessing over you? Do you recall how reassuring it felt? What we have here is a woman who left behind her family and what was familiar, and out of loyalty to her mother-in-law, came to a strange land without much hope at all for the future. How heavy is the weight upon her back, her heart?

Did Boaz' prayer mean anything? Listen...

Ruth 2:13a “You have given me comfort...”

Whatever anxiety she may have been feeling about feeding her mother-in-law, about moving to a strange land, about breaking protocol and making a bold request, she has been comforted by Boaz’s prayer for her.

This isn’t all...later on, at mealtime, Boaz calls Ruth over and offers her an abundance of food, more than she could eat. Custis James points out...

“His actions create a powerful gospel scene: a gleaner seated alongside paid workers, a Moabite eating with Israelites, a man serving a woman, the poor included among the rich, an outsider embraced by the inner circle. Looks like the kind of feasting Jesus would have enjoyed.”

Because we know He participated in these types of feasts as well.

Ruth is on what might some might see as the losing end with all of these examples...a gleaner, a foreigner, a woman, poor, an outsider...but somewhere on that dusty road between Moab and Bethlehem, she embraced God and His people... “Your God will be my God, your people will be my people”...and now God together with His people are embracing her.

I said last week, when our choices and our decisions align with God’s plan and purpose, it’s a beautiful thing. That’s what is happening here.

When it was time to get back to work, Boaz, knowing what Ruth had earlier requested, said this to his workers,

Ruth 2:15b “Even if she gathers among the sheaves (‘Let me tell you, she’s bold enough to do it’), **don’t embarrass her.**

He told them to pull some stalks from what had been bundled and leave them for her to come along and pick up. So Ruth worked in the fields until evening, and when she had

separated the grain from the stalks, she had what amounted to anywhere from 30 to 50 pounds!

What do you think Naomi's reaction will be when Ruth arrives home? We'll look at that next week, but let's close with this question...

3. WHAT'S YOUR NEXT STEP?

If we're going to join in on the work God is doing, in each of our lives, in this church, in this community, it means we have to be ready to move. And so do you think He's telling you your next step should be? Here's a few suggestions:

Have you noticed the theme of food scarcity this week and last? Last week we read about a famine in Naomi's hometown, and acknowledged that most of us don't really have any idea what it would be like to live in a time and place where there is literally no food to be found. This morning we looked at the life of a gleaner, scavenging for kernels of grain that fell by the wayside.

There are people still scavenging for food in our world today, going through dumpsters here in the United States, children rummaging through garbage piles in developing countries. If this troubles you in any way, maybe your next step is to **play a part in reducing world hunger.**

There is going to be a link that shows up on our Youtube and Facebook page, that will take you to the World Vision website, specifically to their **gift catalog page**. I've also provided the link in your bulletin - really all you have to do is google World Vision Gift Catalog - and you'll be right where you need to be.

Once you will go there, you will have the choice of purchasing a chicken for \$25, or a duck for \$30, a goat for \$85 for individuals or communities where food is scarce. If you would prefer, you can make a contribution to a hunger relief fund for \$50.

We can be sure that it is God's intention to feed the hungry in this world...and He is inviting you and I to join Him in this work. Not to hoard, not to cut to the very edge of the field and keep all that God has given us for ourselves.

Now I know that many of you are already partnering with God and the work He is doing...you sponsor a child, or several children through various organizations. You volunteer time up at our Food Pantry. And every time you contribute money to the offering, a small percentage of your contribution goes towards different ministries or organizations that are working to alleviate hunger in this world.

But we all should be asking ourselves this question: ***“How big is a corner? How wide is an edge?”*** Not looking for a specific answer so we can place limits on ourselves, but to help us to recognize there is no limit in light of how generous has God been towards us.

Are we willing, like Boaz, to open our hand wide and play a part in fulfilling God’s plan, His vision for this world? I guarantee you, you’ll be writing a page that you will one day look back on...that time when you purchased a goat and two chickens in order to provide a steady source of eggs, milk and protein to help feed children and families.

When God’s purpose aligns with our choices, it’s truly a beautiful thing.

Another possibility regarding the “Next Step” that God may be asking many of us to take. Remember when we talked about how Ruth’s bold request probably challenged Boaz to ***“color outside the lines of his understanding of God’s law. The letter of the law says, ‘Let them glean.’ The spirit of the law says, ‘Feed them.’”***

That resonated with me...I don’t want to be fall into the trap of being content with precise obedience and fall far short of what God really intends. And so the next step for some of us: This week, ***Read God’s Word and Seek His True Intent.***

When Jesus delivered His Sermon on the Mount, He gave example after example of how He is calling us to go above and beyond “precise obedience”. The law says “Do not murder”, and we can obey that command, but fall far short of God’s intent. Jesus is calling each of us to go above and beyond that...to search our hearts and release any anger or contempt we have for *anyone* else...be it a co-worker, certain entertainers, sports figures, or politicians...let’s not kid ourselves into thinking we’re obeying God if we’re carrying around contempt in our hearts for others.

The law says don't commit adultery with another man's wife, and men, we can obey that command, but still fall far short of God's intent. Jesus is calling His followers, men and women to search our hearts and see others as real people and not objects that can be used for our own pleasure.

This week, as we read God's Word, let's acknowledge that pleasing God isn't reduced to a list of rules that need to be kept and sins that must be avoided.

Know that God's ultimate intent behind Jesus' teaching is for us to love one another as He has loved us, and so we'll be taking specific steps to put this into practice.

One more suggestion as you consider the next step God would have you take... **Initiate or participate in a beautiful gospel scene.**

Another part of today's text that resonated with me was when Boaz invited Ruth to join him and the workers when it was time to eat. She was a foreigner, a woman, a poor gleaner...and as she feasted with them, she was being embraced by God and His people. It was the kind of feasting Jesus would have enjoyed.

I know that in the midst of COVID inviting someone to eat with you in close proximity may not be wise, but for those of you who find yourself working alongside other employees...it doesn't take long to identify and recognize the one's who are the outsiders. It may be someone from another country, or someone who just doesn't fit into the work culture at the place where you're employed because of age, gender, how they look, the way they talk, dress, what they believe.

Could it be that Jesus is encouraging us to look for opportunities to approach an outsider and engage with them with dignity and respect. Instead of avoiding them, ask them about their family, their interests, their hopes. You will find yourself in the midst of a beautiful gospel scene...the kind Jesus so much enjoys.

If it's real, if it's genuine, you'll be writing a page that for years you will look back on, that time that you partnered with God and together, you embraced and welcomed and showed love to someone who most likely rarely experiences it.

So whether it's playing a part in reducing world hunger, being determined to discern God's intent behind His instructions, or initiating or participating in a beautiful gospel scene, or some other step that God is asking you to take, go from here prepared to make choices and decisions that you believe would align with God's plan and purpose...and by doing so, play a part in the work He is doing. Write some beautiful pages in the book that is being written about your life.

Okay...when we come back next week, we'll pick up where we left off. Ruth has worked all day, wrapping up by husking the grain, at which point...

Ruth 2:18a ...she carried it back to town.

Prayer