

Things Don't Just Happen: *Community*

Ruth 2

In our last episode in the story of Ruth, we saw in chapter 1:

- **The migration:** To rescue his family from starvation, a man named Elimelek had moved his family from Bethlehem to Moab, a place no God-fearing Jewish man would ever take a young family. Soon, he died and then his two sons died after marrying Moabite women thus leaving Elimelek's wife Naomi and two daughters-in-law to survive without men in a man's world. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, went back to her people and their gods. But, Ruth made a clear commitment to the God of the Bible and to her mother-in-law. "Where you go, I will go, Naomi," she said. "Your people will be my people and your God my God." So, these two widows began the trip back to Bethlehem.
- **The "Hesed":** We thus saw that Ruth, the immigrant, Moabite, widow demonstrates "hesed" by the way she lived her life. **Hesed is the word summing up many of the attributes of God, e.g., kindness, faithfulness, grace, mercy, love and loyalty.** It's beautiful to see hesed in action in young Ruth while, at the same time, it's shocking to see it coming from an immigrant widow who was new to knowing Jehovah God.
- **The Return:** Finally, in the last verse of the first episode (1:22), we last saw Naomi arriving in Bethlehem as a bitter and angry old woman. Ruth was at her side – but no one even seemed to acknowledge the presence of this young immigrant from the hated country of Moab (1:19). But there is a ray of hope that breaks in. As Ruth enters Bethlehem, at long last, the famine ends and the barley harvest is beginning.

Today, we're going to let the story address this question: **What does it mean for us to live in this world as the people of God** (both individually and as a church family)? **Ruth 2 will show us that what it means is that those who represent God in this world are placed where we are in order to demonstrate in practical ways the heart of God to the people in the places where he puts us.**

As episode 2 begins, "Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor (2:2)."

We see that Naomi and Ruth have lodging on Elimelek's family property but they otherwise have no means of support. Remember that Naomi had family in Bethlehem. It will become clear later in the story that there were family members in Bethlehem who should have stepped in to support these two widows but they are nowhere to be found in these women's time of need. The family was the basic unit of the support structures of Israel. In their nation's laws, family members had deep and clear obligations to help and protect one another when needs arose. But, Elimelek's family did not step in to meet needs for Naomi and Ruth.

But, God knew that there would be people always entering into Israel who did not have family support. These were always immigrants, orphans and widows. The God who made and loves all people had established laws about how his people are to treat those in our neighborhoods who are in need and without support. Just one of those places was in **Dt 24:19-22:** *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the immigrant, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands... Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

This was one of the clear ways that the people of God, i.e., the people of Israel, were to be different from other nations. The people of God were to reflect God's ways very practically through caring for anyone who came into their country in need. And, Ruth somehow seems to know about these laws.

But, the people in Bethlehem as a whole were not doing what God had commanded. So, as ch. 2 opens, these two widows obviously were on their own. So, Ruth asks permission of Naomi to go out into the fields of Bethlehem to find scraps of grain that were supposed to be left in the fields.

Note this: In that time, it was very dangerous for her to do this. Sexual assault was widespread – and that included places like Bethlehem. That reality becomes a major theme in chs 2-3, i.e., that Ruth was walking into danger when she headed out to the harvest fields. But, as I have learned from so many people who have found

themselves in situations like this, the human desire to survive forces people into very difficult places. Many of the immigration problems all over the world have come about because people are trying to find a way to survive. Naomi knew Ruth's decision would put her in danger but, in the midst of Naomi's depression, she grants permission and, Ruth goes out into the countryside and into a place of peril in service to her mother in law. It's another act of Ruth showing "hesed".

"As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz... (2:3)"

I love how the writer writes this in v.3. Literally, the Hebrew writer wrote, "By chance Ruth chanced into the field owned by a man named Boaz." Her being in that field looks fully coincidental. But, as we learned in ch. 1, "things don't just happen". Mark this down: Ruth made a real decision to go into that field – but, just as certainly, God was at work at the same time as Ruth was deciding.

What Ruth didn't know is something that we as readers were told about in **2:1**, i.e., that this Boaz was a "man of standing" from the clan of Elimelek – yes, the same Elimelek into whose family Ruth had married. When Ruth meets Boaz in what seems to be a fully accidental way, we as readers are in the know. "Aha!" we should think. "God seems to be orchestrating something."

This description of Boaz being a "man of standing" is significant. It meant he had financial resources, owned property, was the boss over a number of employees, and that he was a community leader. In our way of thinking, **Boaz had power and privilege. How would he use it?** To put it concisely, Boaz used what he was and had to show God's hesed to this young immigrant woman named Ruth. Let me show you how that is described:

Boaz's life of practicing hesed (2:4-16)

1. He Sees -- *Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to (2:5)?"*

In v.6, for the 1st time in Bethlehem, we discover someone who consciously and openly notices Ruth's presence – though, as we will see, others did know that she was in Bethlehem. This is what so many people, who do not feel welcome in a place, say when I speak to them. "I'm in a place but it's as if I don't even exist." **What Boaz wonders about** when he asks to whom Ruth belongs is this: "What's that young woman doing out there alone?" That's dangerous. Whose family is she a part of? Who's watching out for her?"

We know as followers of Jesus, of course, that all people are important to God. We even know that Jesus was willing to die for all people. Knowing this should change the way we see all people who are in our neighborhood. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, "*Christ died for all so now we can look at no one from the world's point of view... For, if anyone is in Christ, that person becomes a new creation (2 Cor 5:14-17).*"

Ruth is shocked when Boaz "sees" her: She asks, "*Why do you even notice me as an immigrant (2:10)?"*

This is where hesed begins: I've discovered that **God's people begin to show God's hesed to others, especially to those in need, when we begin to see all people as God sees people.**

2. He Protects – *"Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you (2:9)."*

I cannot overemphasize the danger that Ruth was in as she went out into the fields to gather scraps of food so that she and Naomi would not starve. She was a young, immigrant woman with no one to protect her in a world in which abuse and sexual assault were rampant. Sadly, Boaz knew that she was in danger even in his own field. That's why he had to warn his own men. How will a young woman alone like this be able to escape the assault that inevitably would come? So, Boaz used his place of authority to protect her. And, when he had secured safety in his own field, he said to Ruth in **v.8**, "*Stay here and work. Let this be your place of safety.*"

I have heard the stories of how those who work in the agricultural fields of our own state experience this kind of danger. And, as I alluded to last week, these kinds of dangers of women and children being assaulted in the entertainment industry, in the political world, in business and in religious circles are flooding into our consciousness in recent weeks and months. The church must be a place where those who are vulnerable find safety. We must all watch out for that as Boaz did. And, when we leave our church gatherings and go to our places of residence or work, we must learn from Boaz, i.e., to use whatever influence we have to protect those in danger whenever we have opportunity and ability.

3. **He Provides** – “Whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled...” Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her... (2:9,15-16).”

It’s clear to me that Boaz had the kind of view of his possessions that the Bible teaches us all to have, i.e., **he didn’t view what he had as something to be consumed only by himself – but as a stewardship to further God’s hesed in the lives of others.** So, he made it so that Ruth didn’t have to lug her own water to work. He made the water brought for the employees available to her. And, Boaz allowed Ruth not only to snack on whatever leftovers she was able to find in the field but to share in the lunchtime food provided for his workers.

Just as God is Jehovah-Jireh, the God who provides, Boaz provided.

4. **He helped her belong** -- “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me... (2:8)”

This “man of standing” calls this immigrant woman, “My daughter”. He refuses to let her be alone and isolated out on the edges of the field. Instead, Boaz brings her into “the women who work for me”. He personally serves her bread. In grateful amazement, Ruth can only say, “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants (2:13).”

Bringing This Home to Us

How might this story change our lives and our church? That’s the question I’ve been asking all week. I believe we see the answer to that in what is the heart of this second chapter of the story, **vv.11-12:** *Boaz said to Ruth, “I’ve been told... all about how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. 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 come to take refuge.”*

This is beautiful language that speaks of God being one who provides wings of provision, protection and belonging for all people who come to him. The point is that when Ruth had made Naomi’s people and God her own people and God, she came under the wings of the Lord. And, where are those wings to be experienced? They should have been experienced in the community of God’s people. That community of God’s people to which Ruth had come out of love for her mother-in-law was itself supposed to be the place of God’s protection.

But, sadly, she needed protection there! It took a person like Boaz, one who was committed to the ways of the Lord and to applying them to people like Ruth, to reach out to her, sacrifice for her in practical ways, in order for the “wings of the Lord” to enfold this wonderful, young, immigrant, single widow. That is how you and I are supposed to see people – and how we are to live.

Brothers and sisters, what we see in this passage is central to our calling as a church – and as followers of Jesus. Here is the principle: **God intends for much of his hesed to be shown through his people.** God’s blessing comes to the people of our neighborhood by us living lives of hesed. God plants communities in this world to make his ways known. When the Apostle Paul asked about his ministry to the Gentiles, the 1st C church leaders told him in **Gal 2:10** that he was to preach the gospel and to remember the poor. When church leader James told church people about what genuine religion looks like, he said that “*religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress* (James 1:27).”

I see so much of this in the hearts of so many of you who are a part of Lake Avenue Church. That’s a part of why I love being a part of this church family. Over the past week, we have learned of the deaths of several long-time members of our congregation who have lived life to the glory of God and then the Lord has recently taken home to be with him, people like Roger Jensen, John Heck, and John Benton.

I could say much about each of them. However, because John Benton’s life seemed to mirror Boaz’s in many ways, I want to tell you about him. He and his wife Elsie founded the Walter Hoving Homes, one of which is located here in Pasadena. In that home, women in distress and in danger have found Jesus and then found provision, protection and places of belonging.

At John’s memorial service, his grandson said, “My grandfather was guided by such a simple and clear principle: **“I will step in to meet needs in the name of Jesus.”** That’s what guided him. In that memorial service, I heard the testimonies of one woman after another who had found a place of belonging, freedom from a past and a new life in Christ. Over 23,000 women have been touched by the ministry. What people saw in John and

Elsie Benton is what I see today in this man named Boaz. Truthfully, it should be seen in all of us who claim that Jesus is our Lord and in this church that declares that Jesus is lord here.

So, let me challenge us all: each one of us should develop a way of life like that of Ruth and Boaz or of John and Elsie Benton. When you come to church, look for people like Ruth – people who may not feel like the fit, people who may seem to be in trouble, people in distress. Go to them and see them, provide for them, protect them and help them to belong.

And when you leave church, approach the workplace (or your neighborhood or school) as Boaz did. Look for those to whom you might show the “hesed” of God. This is not just something that the super-people like Ruth and Boaz should engage in. They weren’t super-people! She was an immigrant woman in a foreign land. Boaz was a business leader in his own country. The whole community of those known as the people of God should have been characterized by hesed.

The Book of Ruth is a call to all of us to deal with people the way we see Ruth dealing with Naomi and Boaz dealing with Ruth. It became a way of life for them. That’s clear from Naomi’s words in **2:20**: “*The LORD bless Boaz!*” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “*He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.*” In other words: This is the way he always was – and this still is the way he is. Loving others as God loves needs to be a daily way of life. This is the way I want to live. I call us all to be Ruths and Boazes here at LAC. Let us be a people and place of refuge, a place of providing the wings of God’s care for people.

Episode 2 Draws to a Close

The effect of Boaz’s actions was that Ruth took home that first day between 26-50 pounds of grain. And, she would be enabled to do the same for the duration of the barley and then the wheat harvest, usually about 7 weeks. And Naomi is astounded. She said to Ruth, “*That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers (2:20).*” With that comment, there seems to be hope that these two widows will find a lasting refuge.

However, episode 2 ends with a note that states a harsh reality that Ruth would have to face, i.e., that the harvest was ending. Naomi and Ruth’s pantry is full now -- but it looks like their lives will soon be empty again. They would soon be back to where they started. This episode ends with a thud!

During the harvest, Ruth had a place of belonging. At its end, she has only Naomi – and everyone knows that Naomi is old and won’t be around long. Sadly, Ruth seems to have lost contact with Boaz. Ruth finds herself is in one of those ambiguous waiting games that so many of us have experienced. But, we have already begun to learn that “things don’t just happen.”

Ruth is now in a place in which she doesn’t know what’s next. But, she seems already to have learned that God does know. She has proven to be faithful to God in such times – and to trust his ways. She will need to do the same again.

And so will you and I – again and again and again. May this Jesus-centered community we call Lake Avenue Church grow in being a place that when we are here, we experience together that we are under the wings of our loving and gracious Lord who is at work at all times and in all things.