

## The Harvest || Ruth 2

### Rev. Drew Hanson || July 29, 2018

#### Introduction

As some of you saw on Facebook, Cassie and I adopted a dog this week. She is a beautiful, calm, loving, 3-year-old Chocolate lab mix. At least, the agency told us she's 3 years old and that she's a chocolate lab mix. She is definitely a mixture of breeds, as she's significantly smaller than a lab. Regardless, we are so happy with her. She's originally from Alabama and in May, her front right leg was crushed, most likely by a car, and the adoption agency believed that she was likely abandoned by her owner to avoid the cost of surgery. So, she was taken into a shelter and her front right leg was amputated. So she is a tripawd.

Now I'm not *just* telling you this because we are really excited, and I just couldn't help sharing this with you. The timing of the adoption is special.

The name that she was given at the agency was Elizabeth, and we don't know what it was before that. Four-syllable names are usually a little long for dog names, so we decided that we would change her name. The person we worked with even encouraged it. So we tossed around several names. We thought about tripawd specific names. Pogo, Peggy, Eileen, Tracy (get it? Tres-y? Tres is three in Spanish). I also looked up names for chocolate labs, and there are some doozies. But I saw one that stood out. I wish there was a more respectable way that we first thought of this name, but there wasn't. The website suggested naming a chocolate lab Ruth, short for Baby Ruth, the candy bar. And of course it started snowballing from there. I'm going through the book of Ruth in this sermon series. We're talking about how Ruth and two other characters demonstrate faithful, loyal love to one another. We also like classic people names for dogs. So Ruth was a good choice. What

actually sealed the deal was the other Cassie made a fun connection. The woman who coordinated our adoption was Naomi. Too many signs pointing to this name to ignore it.

I also promise that we didn't choose this name because I was desperate for sermon illustrations. Our Ruth reminds us of the biblical Ruth because of her faithful, loyal love.

## **Gleaning the Harvest**

### *Leviticus*

In chapter 1 of Ruth, Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, demonstrating faithful, loyal love to the one who showed her God's love. Naomi would have been alone in her return to Bethlehem, and Ruth would not allow her to be abandoned. The chapter ends with the barley harvest beginning, and now we read of how the harvest brings life to Naomi and Ruth. In chapter 2, Ruth and Naomi make it to Bethlehem, and they need to figure out how to survive as poor widows unable to work. This is where two ancient practices come into play. First, remember that in this day, Israel was largely agrarian. There weren't any major cities yet; a place like Bethlehem was probably just a farming village. So in this agrarian society, God set up a social safety net in Israel's law. Leviticus 19:9-10 says this, "<sup>9</sup> When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. <sup>10</sup> You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." A few chapters later, Leviticus 23:22 says this, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God." So God commanded all farmers to not harvest everything their fields produced, but to leave the edges of the field and gleanings –

which means the produce that falls to the ground during harvest – for the poor and the foreigner. God provides for the poor and the foreigner through this ordinance.

### *Deuteronomy*

Then, in Deuteronomy 24, it gives us the reason that Israel was called to care for the foreigner and widow: “<sup>19</sup> When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. <sup>20</sup> When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. <sup>21</sup> When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. <sup>22</sup> Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.” God reminds Israel that they were slaves, they were foreigners, they were refugees, they were immigrants, and therefore they should care for those types of people in their own nation. God was shaping Israel into a nation, to use a modern phrase, God was shaping Israel into a nation of laws, and central to that law was the love and care for the vulnerable: for the widow, the orphan, the poor, the alien. Ruth and Naomi were both poor, they were both widows, and Ruth was a foreigner. They were vulnerable, and thankfully for them, God’s laws were in place to care for them.

### *Risk*

But people are people. Just because this was God’s law didn’t mean it actually happened all the time. We humans are very good at looking out just for us and those close to us rather than to the orphan, widow, poor, or foreigner among us. If you need evidence, you can open up to just about any Old Testament prophet and you’ll read how Israel does not follow God’s laws, especially the laws that protect the vulnerable.

So Ruth and Naomi, while theoretically protected by the laws, are still taking big risks. Their survival is not guaranteed. But, in more ways than one, the harvest saves them. Remember last week, the first chapter closed with telling us the barley harvest was beginning. That marks the time of year, but is also marks hope. Hope in Ruth and Naomi's lives, and hope in our lives too. God provides harvest. The timing of the harvest, and the law of God requiring farmers to leave parts of their fields behind for the poor and foreigner, allowed Ruth and Naomi to survive. And it was the relationship formed during the harvest that helped them both to thrive.

### *Reward*

The risk that Naomi and Ruth take pay off. Ruth goes to a field at random and begins gleaning – collecting the harvest that is left behind for the poor. Look at this detail in verse 3: “As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.” *As it happened*. There are a few books in the Old Testament where God does not directly speak or act. The book of Ruth doesn't say anywhere that “God said to Ruth” or “Then God brought the harvest.” These books show a different side of God, maybe a side of God that we are *more* familiar with but don't always talk about. God is constantly at work behind the scenes. “As it happened” is not what it seems, it does not mean the chance or luck that it implies, rather it is a marker of God working behind the scenes. God doesn't just direct Ruth to a field to gather food; God guides Ruth to the *right* field, the field belonging to Boaz.

Boaz is a good, upright man, who is the third character in the book of Ruth who demonstrates that faithful, loyal love that Naomi and Ruth have in abundance. Naomi and Ruth are common names nowadays; I

don't know why Boaz didn't stick around. Maybe we'll name our first son Boaz, Cassie what do you think?

Boaz is a good man because he follows that old law of leaving food behind at harvest for the poor and the foreigner. He's also a good man because he provides for Ruth and Naomi in need, and protects Ruth in a situation where women were not always safe, as we see in verse 9.

### **Kin Redeemer**

But Boaz wasn't just a good man; our translation of Ruth also says that he was one of Naomi's nearest kin. This translation is a little deceiving, because to us nearest kin is an objective thing. He was a cousin or an uncle or something, which made him family, and he was one of the closest they had. If I asked you to think of some of your closest kin, you might come up with several people to think about. But the word should probably be translated as redeemer kinsman or kin redeemer; this was an unofficial role that wealthy family members had in ancient Israel. This is the second ancient practice that comes into play in Ruth and Naomi's lives. Because Boaz was related to Elimelech, he was able to inherit all that Elimelech owned, like land and livestock, and inherit the responsibility of caring for those who depended on Elimelech, like Naomi and Ruth. So when Naomi says that Boaz is one of their nearest kin, she's not just saying that she met him once at Elimelech's family reunion. She's saying that this person could be the one who provides for them. He could be the embodiment of the hope that the barley harvest represents. Naomi had told people to no longer call her Naomi, which means "pleasant," but Mara, which means "bitterness." Boaz could redeem Naomi from bitterness back to pleasant.

## Be the Blessing

So Boaz is a good, honorable man who is also a possible kin redeemer for Ruth and Naomi. The stage is set for him to demonstrate *hesed*, that faithful, loyal love that Ruth and Naomi have already demonstrated through the first two chapters. In this chapter, I think the most significant way he does this is through his words. Look at verse 12, Boaz says to Ruth, *“May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!”* Here’s why I think these words are filled with faithful, loyal love. As we’ll see, Boaz plays a significant role in redeeming Ruth and Naomi’s situation. He doesn’t just speak God’s blessing, he embodies God’s blessing. The Lord blesses Ruth and Naomi through Boaz. Boaz is a vessel through which God blesses. But Boaz isn’t just a robot or passive in this blessing. Boaz is attuned to God’s calling, attuned to how God calls him to bless others. We don’t know how Boaz does this, but he had to have daily routines to remind him to listen to God, to pray, to give thanks. God blessing Naomi and Ruth through Boaz wasn’t just by luck or a one-time thing, God shaped Boaz and Boaz was open to that shaping throughout his life so that when the time came, he could respond to God’s call.

When we ask God to bless someone, we need to be open to how God will use us to bless that person. I’ll say that again, when we ask God to bless someone, we need to be open to how God will use us to bless that person. Boaz hears about Ruth’s faithful, loyal love to Naomi, hears about all she does, and asks the Lord to bless her for these great deeds. And God decides to bless her through Boaz. We can’t just be idle with our words of blessing. When we say God bless you to someone, when we tell someone we’ll pray for them, we *have* to be open to how God will bless them through us, we have to be open to how God will use us

to answer their prayer. That doesn't mean that every time we ask for God's blessing on someone that God will always bless them through us, or that we have to be extra nice to that person, it means that we need to be open to the Spirit's guidance to be a channel of love. Boaz did that. That is how he shows faithful, loyal love. He asks the Lord to bless Ruth and Naomi. The Lord provides him an opportunity to do so, and Boaz allows God to bless Ruth and Naomi through him. In chapter 2, he does this by protecting Ruth, giving her a meal, and letting her glean in his field. In chapters 3 and 4, God continues to increase blessing to Naomi and Ruth through Boaz. We'll continue to see how God does that over the next two Sundays.

We are called to be vessels of God's blessing. Like Boaz, that isn't something that just happens. Like Boaz, we need to be attuned to God. In order to be attuned to God, we have to have daily routines that remind us to listen to God. We need regular patterns of prayer, worship, reading and studying Scripture, fellowship, all those things that draw us closer to God. We need that so that when the day comes that God calls us to bless someone, we already know what to do. We can respond in the moment with God's faithful, loyal love.

If you don't have those routines, I would invite you to start. You can start simply. This week, open up the gospel of Matthew and read just one chapter a day. Or open up the Psalms, and begin your day by reading one Psalm. Spend five minutes in silence. No phones, no tv, no distractions. If that means waking up five minutes earlier, try it. In that silence, pray and listen. We can't just flip a switch to demonstrate God's faithful, loyal love whenever we need to. We need to reflect and meditate on God's faithful, loyal love for us, and we need to constantly practice that love with *everyone* that we come into contact with. Then, when the day comes in your life when you say to someone, *"May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for*

*refuge!”* You’ll be ready to be a part of God’s reward and blessing in that person’s life.

### **Conclusion: The Lord is Redeemer**

Here’s how I know you can do this. Boaz could be the kin redeemer for Naomi’s family. Widows and orphans had the hope of a family member who could redeem them, but not everyone had family members like Boaz, who were a combination of wealthy and good. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah took this theme, and made it applicable to us. They said that Israel was like a family, in need to redemption, and the Lord became their redeemer. Nobody can save us or redeem us like God can. Isaiah and Jeremiah promised a day when the Lord would come and redeem his people. That day started just over 2000 years ago. We celebrate that redeemer’s birth at Christmas and his redeeming resurrection on Easter Sunday. Jesus is our redeemer. We are adopted into the family of Christ through Jesus’ sacrifice, and he is our kin redeemer. He has and will always redeem you. And in this redeemed life, we are all called to be open to God using us to bless others. Jesus’ redemption, like the barley harvest, brings us hope. But unlike the barley harvest, which comes and goes with the season, Jesus’ redemption is eternal and everlasting.