

Ruth 2:1-16

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech.

Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you." They answered, "The Lord bless you." Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment." Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. 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!" Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."

At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

Ruth 2:17-23

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my

servants, until they have finished all my harvest.” Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, “It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field.” So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

Deuteronomy 24:16-22

Parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death. You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

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.

When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 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. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Last week we heard the about the misfortunes of Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. Both of their husbands died, and they faced the real likelihood of dying of starvation in Moab, modern-day Jordan. They migrated to Bethlehem in hopes of finding food there. Last week’s reading ended with their arrival, right at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The social unit in this time was not the individual; it was the household. A man and his wife and children and their servants and whatever extended family lived with them. Naomi and Ruth do not have this kind of a household, because both Naomi’s husband Elimelech and his son, Ruth’s husband, are dead. They have nothing and no support system to fall back on.

The Scriptures say that Ruth gleaned. And the law says that the farm workers had to let her. But they don’t really explain what gleaning is. The picture you see on the screen shows

gleaning.¹ Remember, all farm work is still done by human power or animal power – we are nearly two thousand years before anyone will be thinking about mechanical reapers or combines.

Those men on the right are reaping the grain, cutting the stalks with hand tools and binding them into sheaves, large bundles to be transported to the threshing floor. This is inherently an imperfect process. The reapers don't get every stalk of grain, and it's not worth their time to stop and get every stalk that falls. Individual stalks are left standing or lying on the ground.

The woman is gathering up those individual stalks, one by one. This is hot, tiring work, but it does not require the upper-body strength needed to reap. As a gleaner, she gets to keep whatever she can gather.

Did the landowner plant that grain, or have it planted? Yes.

Did the person who is gleaning have anything to do with the grain growing there? No.

It doesn't matter.

The growth of the grain from the seed to the stalk to the ear did not come from the landowner. The growth came from God.

And even the poor person, who owns no land, is a child of God and part of the covenant between God and God's people. Even foreigners get the benefit of that covenant.

God's law says in Leviticus Nineteen that, "When a foreigner lives with you in your land, don't take advantage of him. Treat the foreigner the same as a native. Love him like one of your own. Remember that you were once foreigners in Egypt. I am God, your God [and I say so]."²

¹ This picture may be seen here: <https://emmausroadministries.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/dc85aff0-7132-4acc-a100-c30634944008.jpeg?w=768>

² Leviticus 19:33-34, *The Message*.

That is not a liberal or conservative interpretation of God's law. That is God's law. You may have noticed when I read, that God considers allowing gleaning such an obvious point that it's in the same chapter of the law as not executing parents for their children's crimes. The commandment about loving the foreigner as yourself is in the same chapter as not cheating in business and not selling your own daughter into prostitution.³

That's the background.

Ruth goes to glean in the fields, because she and Naomi need food. She starts in the fields belonging to Boaz, a local man of substance. Not only is Boaz relatively wealthy, but he is a man of well-known moral and ethical character.

Boaz comes out and sees her gleaning in his field. He asks his servant about this young woman whom he does not recognize. The servant tells him who she is, and that she's been working hard all day. Boaz gives some instructions to his people, then goes to Ruth. He tells her to stay in his fields, not to go to someone else's lands, because he's told his workers not to harass her, and to allow her to drink from the water that his servants have drawn.

The law says that poor people could glean, but the harvesters did not have to be happy about it. They could, and I'm sure would, say things to the gleaners. A woman working alone, particularly a foreign woman, would have certainly gotten what we would call sexual harassment; she would be in some danger of rape. Ruth knew this when she went out to glean, but she had no choice. Boaz has told his workers that this young woman is under his protection. They are to protect her and let her drink from their water jugs.

³ Leviticus 19:35, 29.

By the standards of the time, this goes beyond mere compliance with the law. This is extraordinary generosity. If you have ever spent all day doing hard physical work in the sun, you know how important water is.

Ruth falls on her face and asks Boaz why she is doing this for her, a foreigner. Boaz tells her that he's heard her story, how she left her land and her people and came here, how she is taking care of her mother-in-law. He gives her a blessing.

Boaz goes on. He tells her to come eat with him and his people when it's lunchtime, and he makes sure that she eats from the food he provides for his workers. After lunch, he tells his workers to let her glean between the sheaves and to even leave handfuls of grain out for her on purpose. And he tells them again not to humiliate her in any way.

So, Ruth gleans until the evening, and beats out what she has gleaned into just the grain. She finds that she has about thirty pounds of barley. For gleaning, that is a staggering amount!

Ruth takes this grain back to Naomi, who is astonished at how much she has. She asks where Ruth gleaned, and Ruth tells her. Naomi reverses the statement she made last week, "Call me Mara, Bitter, because the Lord has dealt bitterly with me." She praises God and talks about that God's love has not forsaken the living or the dead.

She then explains to Ruth that Boaz is one of their redeemers. This is a good thing, but I'll explain it later, when it comes into the story.

Ruth continues to glean from Boaz's fields through the whole barley harvest and the wheat harvest.

There is more to the story, and we'll read more next week, but let's talk about what this chapter means for us today, three thousand years later.

Our world today has the largest refugee problem since the Second World War. Famine and warfare and oppressive governments are making living conditions so bad in places of the world that risking their lives in travel is better for the people who live there than remaining where they are. You have all seen the pictures of people braving the Mediterranean Sea in tiny boats, far from seaworthy, to try to get to Europe. I tell you, they not insane; they are doing that because staying home is worse.

I am talking about Syria. I am talking about South Sudan. I'm talking about Afghanistan. I am talking about places where there is no law and order to restrain the greed and violence of people who don't care about their neighbors. According to the United Nations High Committee on Refugees, I am talking about twenty-two-point-five million people right now. I'm talking about nearly twenty people forcibly displaced from their homes every minute, or about six hundred since Larry started playing the prelude.⁴

Ruth and Naomi are refugees, and Ruth is an example of what some today call chain migration – she comes along with Naomi as her daughter-in-law. They are allowed to come in and live in Bethlehem, according to the law of God. Boaz treats Ruth just the same way he would a Hebrew woman in the same situation. The Bible calls Boaz a man of substance, a role model worthy of emulation.

The United States of America is the nation we are proud to live in, and we should be proud to live in it. The United States has historically been a nation of substance, at least more so than other nations around us. Historically the US was the giant who protected the weak. As President Eisenhower said, “America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.”

⁴ <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

We are still the most militarily powerful nation on Earth, and at least one of the richest.⁵

Refugees considered for immigration to the United States are the most thoroughly-vetted people on the planet. It is quicker and less paperwork for a US-born citizen to get a government security clearance than for a foreign-born refugee to immigrate to the United States.

You all are smart people. I'll leave the answers to these questions up to you.

Are further restrictions on the immigration of these pre-screened refugees⁶ in line with the law of God?

Is telling people whose homes are destroyed and whose lands are controlled by warlords that we could help them, but we will not, consistent with the law of God?

Is separating already-traumatized children from their parents when they request asylum consistent with the law of God?

Is harassment of refugees and violence against them once they're here, which is on the rise since 2016, in line with the law of God?

⁵ <https://top10reviewof.com/richest-countries-in-the-world/> . Note that this is measuring by per capita GDP, which is deceptive, considering how small some of the top nations on the list (Qatar, Luxembourg) are.

⁶ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/>

Even if the real reasons that people are doing these things were about safety, I've looked, and I have been unable to find in Scripture the "I'm afraid" exception to God's law of love. Scripture tells us that safety comes from obeying God, not from ignoring his commands.

I pray for our nation, that we would find better answers.

AMEN