

Matthew 7: 7-11

‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

Ruth 3

Naomi [Ruth’s] mother-in-law said to her, ‘My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing-floor. Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.’ She said to her, ‘All that you tell me I will do.’

So she went down to the threshing-floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came quietly and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, ‘Who are you?’ And she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.’ He said, ‘May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not be afraid; I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning.’

So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before one person could recognize another; for he said, 'It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor.' Then he said, 'Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out.' So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her back; then he went into the city. She came to her mother-in-law, who said, 'How did things go with you, my daughter?' Then she told her all that the man had done for her, saying, 'He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, "Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed."' She replied, 'Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the matter today.'

For the past couple weeks, we have been reading the Biblical book of Ruth, one that is more familiar to some of us than to others. This week's reading, chapter three, is the climax of the book.

You remember the story thus far: Naomi was a Hebrew woman who moved, with her husband Elimelech, to Moab. Their two sons took Moabite wives. Then father and sons died. One daughter-in-law went back to her mother, but Naomi and Ruth came back to Bethlehem. Naomi tried to talk Ruth into staying in Moab, but Ruth insisted on staying with her, with a kind of stubborn love that goes beyond what anyone has a right to ask or expect. The Hebrew word for that kind of stubborn, unreasonable love is *hesed*. Remember that concept, it's going to come up again.

Ruth has been gleaning, or taking the leftovers from the harvest, in the fields belonging to Boaz, a wealthy Hebrew man. He has not only obeyed God's laws regarding letting Ruth glean, he has gone beyond what was required, letting her eat and drink what he provided for his workers and instructing his workers to deliberately leave grain behind for her.

With this help, Ruth has gathered an amazing amount of grain that she gets to keep and use to feed Naomi and herself. Ruth and Naomi have lived there and Ruth has gleaned on Boaz's land all through the barley harvest and the wheat harvest.

This week, things progress from there.

Some background for our story:

In Old Testament Hebrew law, the extended family was supposed to take care of widows and orphans. The system was also supposed to keep the family land, the land that was given to the family when the Promised Land was conquered, in the family. The way this worked was that, when a man died with no sons, the nearest male relative had the right and responsibility to buy the land and keep it in the family. With the land he got the relatives, and the responsibility to feed, clothe, and take care of them. The responsibility and the right went together – they were not separable. This was referred to as redeeming the land and the people.

If the nearest male relative couldn't or wouldn't afford it, the right and responsibility went to the next nearest male relative, and so on, until you found someone who could and would do it. If you go far enough back, all the Hebrew people are related, so in theory, it wasn't possible for a widow or an orphan to ever be completely out of luck. In practice, it sometimes didn't happen, because nobody went around, asking the right people.

The reason that Ruth has had to glean to get food is that nobody has been going around on her behalf, finding the right male relatives and asking them to redeem Elimelech's land and family. This is the system not working as designed.

Boaz, the rich landowner on whose land Ruth has been gleaning, is a relative of Naomi's late husband Elimelech. He is not the nearest relative, but he's on the short list. He also happens to be single, though apparently significantly older than Ruth.

Threshing is separating the grain from the chaff, the waste parts of the plant. Winnowing is a way to do that. It's low-tech. You throw the grain up in the air when there is wind. The heavier grain falls to the ground, and the lighter chaff floats away in the wind. The threshing floor is a prepared area for this purpose, set up in a windy area outside town, with a paved floor to catch the grain.

Boaz has gone to the threshing floor to winnow the barley. He does this at night, not only because it is cooler, but, because, in this part of the world, there's more wind.

He is lifting a heavy tray of grain head-high, and tossing it up in the air, so that the grain falls and the chaff blows away. Then repeating the process. Again, and again and again. This is hard, hot, sweaty work. People who are threshing typically wear about as little clothing as they can socially get away with.

People who are threshing are in a good mood. The prophet Isaiah uses people rejoicing at the harvest as an example.¹ They have good reason to be in a good mood – they have gotten through the Winter and Spring on just barely enough to eat, and now they have more than they need! The harvest is like the sunrise or like a baby being born – it's God saying that life should go on. People celebrate.

¹ Isaiah 9:3.

Let's see, it's hot and it's dark. People are wearing little clothing. People are celebrating. Likely some wine is flowing. As a result, the threshing floor has a reputation for things that happen there. The word that is translated, "Feet," here, to describe what Ruth uncovers, may well be a euphuism, a way to discuss in polite company other parts of the body one does not normally discuss in that context. It's the same sort of euphuism used to describe the seraphs, or angels, who witness the Call of the Prophet Isaiah. They had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they flew, and with two they covered their "feet."²

So Ruth goes and finds Boaz when he has done his work for the evening and is lying down, full, tired, and contented. He rolls over and asks Ruth, "Who are you?"

That's the key question, isn't it? Who is this young woman? She is originally from Moab, but she's been living in Bethlehem for a month or two. She used to be married to a Hebrew man, but he's dead. Who is she?

Ruth responds not just with her name, but with a statement of relationship. "I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are my redeemer."

Ruth took a chance here. She has put herself completely in Boaz's power. He could do basically whatever he wanted, with no witnesses, and who is anybody going to believe? The wealthy local landowner or the poor immigrant widow?

The new part about the "Me, too" movement is not women being abused at the hands of men. It's women talking about the abuse they have experienced, and men being held accountable. It shames me as a man to say this, but the abuse as old as humanity.

² Isaiah 6:2.

Ruth takes a chance, but she is not doing so blindly. She knows who Boaz is, and what kind of a man he is.

Boaz is surprised, obviously. He does spread his cloak over her, and he tells her not to be afraid. He tells her that he will do whatever she says, because everyone knows that she is a woman of substance. This is the same word that is used in the previous chapter, last week, to describe Boaz himself. She may not be wealthy like he is, but she is a person of character. In that, they are evenly matched.

Boaz tells her that it is true that he is a redeemer. But he is not the redeemer. He is on the short list of relatives of her late father-in-law, but he is not the next-of-kin. He tells her that he will find the next-of-kin and make things happen in the morning.

Early, early in the morning, before it is bright enough for one person to recognize another, she gets up. She still has to protect her reputation, which might be damaged if people knew that she had spent all night on the threshing floor with a man.

Boaz has her hold out his cloak, the one that had been around them the night before, and he puts into it somewhere between sixty and a hundred pounds of grain. That's enough that it could be a brideprice, the present given to a bride's family at a wedding.

Ruth staggers home with this bundle and dumps it on the floor in her mother-in-law's house. Naomi asks Ruth the same question that Boaz did. She asks, "Who are you, my daughter?"

Naomi is asking what happened, and how has Ruth been changed by what happened. How have her relationships been changed? Ruth has expressed that kind of stubborn, unreasonable *hesed* love to Boaz, and she has received it back.

The conclusion of our story is next week, but once again this week, our role model is Ruth.

We, too, are in desperate need of being redeemed.

We, too, are unable to do it ourselves. We do not have the resources, physical, spiritual, or any other kind, to redeem ourselves.

But, like Ruth, we have a redeemer who is a man of substance. He has more goodness than we have badness.

Like Ruth, we have a redeemer who loves us and who will give us good things, all that we need.

Like Ruth, we know that we can trust our redeemer with everything that we have and everything that we are.

Like Ruth, the proper answer to “Who are you?” is an answer in terms of relationship. You are a child of the almighty God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, who loves us with that same kind of stubborn, unreasonable *hesed* love that Ruth loved Naomi and we will see next week, Boaz loves Ruth.

So, like Ruth, we have to go for broke. Completely rely on that redeemer.

Because he’s good for it.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.