

A lesson in the field. A sermon preached on June 5, 2016 at S. Giles Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC (3rd in a series on the Book of Ruth) by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: RUTH 2:1-17
MATTHEW 5:7

Right at the start of chapter 2,
The narrator of the Book of Ruth lets us in on a secret.

At this point, neither Naomi nor Ruth know that within reach of their home, there is a man of considerable wealth and influence who is related to them – a kinsman of Naomi’s late husband, Elimilech.

Chapter 2 centres on the day in which Ruth meets this kinsman – Boaz

At the end of the day after work she tells Naomi what has happened.

Only THEN – and it is just beyond this morning’s reading at vs. 20 does the true significance of her meeting become apparaent to her

NOT until then,does Ruth realize that the meeting is no accident,

But part of the caring purpose of a gracious God.

So, as readers we are told about Boaz in verse 1 of chapter 2

When Ruth meets Boaz in what seems to be truly accidental, we are in the know – *behind the apparent chances of the ordinariness of day to day encounters – God is expressing his providential rule and care.* But again, we are ahead of ourselves – that’s for next week.

This morning, Ruth’s story involves one of the generous provisions of O.T. law – gleaning in the field.

Out of concern for the helpless, the poor and the transient population of Israel, Old Testament law required reapers in the fields at harvest time and also vinters in the vineyards and those who tended the olive groves to leave a portion of the crop, including the edges of the grain fields,

Which was collected by the needy.

The reapers were not to go back for the grain that they had missed or dropped.

⁹When 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. ¹⁰You 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. [Leviticus 19:9-10]

That refrain **I am the Lord your God** is reflective of the character of God –

Concern for the poor and the oppressed

This concern is to be matched by a certain pattern of behavior in the lives of God's people.

In other words, because God is a God who receives slaves and cares for the poor, helpless and needy,

The economic laws of the land are to express this concern as well.

For the land and the people belong to this covenant God,

And their pattern of life is to reflect his nature.

So the law of gleaning was one of the ways ancient Israel understood and worked out their obligations to the underprivileged, marginalized, widows, orphans and aged.

Ruth, as a poor widow – still grieving the loss of her husband, takes advantage of this law

Ruth knows very well that this provision in the law is a generous provision;

A mark of grace really, that goes beyond personal rights in property ownership.

Now,

While Ruth knew that it was mandatory for the owner to leave something for the poor,

It was possible that unscrupulous landowners to make life difficult for the gleaners.

The unscrupulous landowners can cut the corners of their fields,

Clean sweep the gleaners and let's be very honest,
women in fields by themselves are vulnerable.

Yet, we have already noted,
Ruth is no shrinking violet
She and Naomi need to eat.
Quickest way to ensure that they are not the victims
of hunger – glean a field
Ruth seeks Naomi's permission to do just that.
Naomi really has no choice in the matter.

But how worried and anxious Naomi must
have felt as Ruth went out the door
Worried as to the physical demands of gleaning on
Ruth,
Worried as to Ruth's safety in the fields.

So out Ruth goes, following behind the
reapers in a field close by
This is though no ordinary field – it is a field
belonging to one Boaz – her father in law's kin
More about him as the story continues.
This is also no ordinary field of reapers and owner
Pay close attention to the words Boaz uses to greet
his reapers and their reponse

The Lord be with you

The Lord bless you

This exchange may seem like a simple hello, but it
really distinguishes this barley field from the
neighbouring fields.

For the speakers are actively summoning God
to be present among them.

That is the reason behind that opening response I
 have used to begin every Sunday morning worship
 It is not just a signal to settle down – though it often
 has that effect

It is to ask God to be among us,
 Present with us as we worship Him.

I wonder how or if the tenor or atmosphere of
 a work place or a gathering that contained believers
 began each day

Or each gathering with such an exchange.

No doubt someone would say – politically
 incorrect, prostatizing, weird, flakey – all that and
 more by some

But I do not think as many as we think.

For surely as God's people we want God to be
 present with us do we not – whatever it is we are
 doing or beginning to do

And wherever we are

So, by wandering into this particular barley
 field the grieving, impoverished, socially isolated
 Ruth has discovered sanctuary and safety.

And this is further confirmed as shown in the
 lesson Paul read.

Rather than accepting the terms of gleaning
 and meager offerings she could hope to bring home
 for Naomi and herself,

Ruth challenges the status quo and stretches and
 Mosaic law to the limit.

, “Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.” [Ruth 2:7]

Ruth is not interested in the letter of the law which says LET THEM GLEAN

Oh no, Ruth wants to ensure Naomi and she have enough to eat

So Ruth asks to glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers

In other words,

Ruth asks to go where gleaners are not permitted

To work AMONG the harvesters where plenty of newly cut grain lays,

Waiting to be gathering into bundles.

Ruth, the young Moabitess is challenging the way things have always been done in the matter of gleaning.

Tidy conformity to the Law falls short in this case to what God intends.

By her actions, Ruth, now herself a believer isn't just fighting for Naomi and her needs,

She is also pressing Boaz to think about letter and spirit of the Law.

What was God's initial intent in proscribing gleaning?

Surely it was to ensure the marginalized and the needy who had to glean had enough to eat?

Has the practice of gleaning calcified to just empty observation?

Boaz's response is as astonishing as
 Ruth's request is outrageous.
 Boaz could have become defensive – his field and
 he's the boss
 But no, Boaz acts on her suggestion.
 And not only acts, but exceeds Ruth's request.

He guarantees her safety
 He provides her with water and food
 No hidden agenda or ulterior motive in helping
 Ruth.

Further Boaz instructs his reapers
 'Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and
 do not reproach her. ¹⁶You must also pull out some
 handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for
 her to glean, and do not rebuke her.' (2:15-16)

That day alone Ruth gleans an ephah of barley – 29
 US pounds

A single day's gleaning – the equivalent of half a
 month's wages.

Put in further perspective – the ration of food that a
 working man of the period would be given rarely
 exceeded 2 US pounds a day

Lavish generosity from Boaz to Ruth and Naomi.

Why?

Text tells us

**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. ¹² 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! ¹³ Then she said, ‘May I continue to find favour 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.’ 2:11-13

It is an example of the Hebrew attribute known as hesed.

There is no exact translation from Hebrew to English for hesed, But it is a word that includes though is not limited to: love, unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, lovingkindness.

Hesed is one of the major themes of Ruth’s story.

It is also a description of what God does

Having entered into a relationship with his people – you and me
 God himself is bound to act toward his people – you and me – in certain ways.
 God is utterly faithful.

The fullness of the Lord’s hesed is seen in the Cross of Jesus.

Hesed drives the book of Ruth and much of scripture – Naomi to Ruth and Orpah, Ruth to Naomi, Boaz to Ruth and Naomi, Ruth to Boaz.

Hesed still drives the community of faith – this or any other.

That said, what can be said about hesed in our lives
 as individual believers, called to follow Jesus
 And in the life of the community of faith – this or
 any other

Hesed is not about warm emotional feelings.

It is about practical acts of love and service to
 another person because he or she is part of a
 community of believers or they are simply in need.
 And it is not what WE THINK they need, but what
 they need.

*Hesed is predicated on an appreciation, knowledge,
 thankfulness of God's hesed to each of us.*

Unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness,
 loyalty, goodness, loving kindness do not just
 appear within us to show to others,

They grow and are cultivated within us by paying
 attention to God's actions in our lives.

And all of us, if we are serious have experienced
 GOD'S hesed more than once have we not?

Presently we will join in communion not
 because we deserve it, nor because it is owed to us.
 We join around the Lord's table because this is a gift
 of God for the people of God

*No community of faith can remain spiritually
 healthy and growing without God's hesed or the practice
 of hesed among and within the community of faith and
 beyond it.*

Without hesed – a word that includes though is not limited to unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, lovingkindness. It does not matter how impressive the church building,
 How varied and spectacular the programmes offered,
 How colourful and spell binding the worship
 How ‘busy’ the faith community is in good works
 That community of faith will begin to die spiritually and if no action is taken become merely an historical statistic.

Hesed – is very fragile. – not because God is a mimsy God – quite the opposite as we well know and scripture highlights – God is a lavishly giving God. No hesed is fragile – because it is to be played forward by us – and sometimes in our lives we treat people – within and outside the community – the way that the man forgiven a great debt treated the one who owed him a much smaller debt.

You remember Jesus’ parable – it begins with the landowner forgiving one of his servants a huge debt.

But when it comes to a much smaller debt owed to the one forgiven a great debt.

| the great debtor goes ballistic and insists on the maximum punishment for that debtor – forgetting his large debt already forgiven.

Hesed is also fragile, for there remains abroad within communities of faith – what is best known as a critical spirit.

Maybe it is part of our DNA because we know there were clear examples of this critical spirit among those who were led from slavery in Egypt into freedom and a new land. The Israelites murmured a lot...something it seemed was always wrong with something – water, food, sun, direction.

How easy it is to seek out with the efficiency of a heat seeking missile things that irk, anger, disappoint, frustrate us

And centre on these

Make THESE things the centre of our conversation
Our thoughts, our lives

Why do we allow this critical spirit a foothold in our lives?

What about the unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, lovingkindness of God to us.

Three or so years ago, I was attending my last Assembly Council meeting in Toronto.

A friend asked me over supper how things were going.

Like opening a sluice gate, I ranted about how tough it was in the parish, the Presbytery, the Synod, the family-- how sometimes it was like herding cats, how sometimes it seemed like the

ending of the book of Judges – everyone doing what was right in the sight of their own eyes.

When I had to stop to draw breath, my friend quietly said to me “Herb do you think you will ever be happy.” It was like I had been slapped in the face.

It was as I look back a clear piece of discipline from the Lord through my friend.

Oh I still at times wrestle with a critical spirit in my own life

But I resolved that day and with the Lord’s help never again allow myself to be so ungrateful to God.

For that is in essence what a critical spirit is – it is being ungrateful to God!

We absorb and mark God’s hesed to each of us so that we may be able to play that hesed forward to others.

Will this be easy all the time with all people.

NO! We know it won’t because this is an imperfect world filled with a number of people God sends into our lives that are, shall we say challenging.

But then I think all of us are sometimes challenging to others.

And I believe that is but one reason we need to practice God’s hesed –recognizing and giving thanks for God’s unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, lovingkindness as

shown in our lives in measurable and observable ways

And then paying that heseid --unfailing love, kindness, mercy, faithfulness, loyalty, goodness, lovingkindess --forward in our treatment of all others.

Our communities of faith are strengthened by it and I think when we do it, we really do have something unique to offer to a very needy and nasty world in which we daily live.