

Ruth 2:1-13
John 1:14-18

20th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 15, 2023

Gleaning in the Field of Grace

Last Sunday we began a four-part series of sermons from each of the four chapters in the Book of Ruth. The first sermon sought to echo blessings heard in chapter 1. The sermon today reflects on Ruth's experience of gleaning in a field of barley.

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In the Torah, which is composed of the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—Israelites are instructed to provide food for the poor and the alien by allowing them to gather a portion of each season's harvest. Gleaning in the field is a prominent theme in the second chapter of Ruth. Listen to verses 1-13 of chapter 2

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

We often hear the prologue to John's gospel at Christmas, when we celebrate The Incarnation, the eternal Word becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus Christ. Light came into darkness. Grace and truth shined brightly. But John's words are also appropriate throughout the year. Listen to chapter 1, verses 14-18

Sermon

Hard reality begins to settle in after Ruth and Naomi arrive back in Naomi's home of Bethlehem in Israel. In order to survive they need food to eat. No one comes forth to offer help—neither townspeople nor relatives. We wonder what Naomi would have done without her daughter-in-law Ruth; after all, she was getting on in years. She is empty, but she is not alone. Ruth was with her and it was the beginning of the barley harvest.

In verse 1 of chapter 2 we are told that Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, and his name was Boaz. Furthermore, we are told that Boaz was a man of substance—a man of social and economic clout; a man of standing in the Bethlehem community.

It is Ruth who takes the initiative in addressing the isolation and hunger that she and Naomi experience. She tells Naomi that she would like to go into the fields and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone who may show her kindness. Perhaps Ruth did not ask her mother-in-law to glean with her because she wanted to protect the once wealthy Naomi from the shame of their present impoverishment. Perhaps at this point Naomi was not up to work in the fields. At any rate, Naomi concurs, and off Ruth goes to glean in a field behind the reapers. “And it just happened” that the field to which she went was owned by Boaz.

When we first think of the Book of Ruth, what comes to mind? A love story? The bond of two women of different ages and different countries? God's providential hidden hand at work? But no doubt many think of *gleaning* in a field.

As noted in the introduction to our Old Testament lesson for today, providing a source of food for the needy was God's intent for life in Israel. Listen to these words from Leviticus 19:

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 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. (vv. 9-10)

In the book of Deuteronomy we read:

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. (24:21-22)

So Israel must mirror God's compassion for them by extending a like compassion for vulnerable people in their midst. (19:22)

Through the practice of gleaning, owners of fields and vineyards are protected in that they are allowed to get grain or olives or grapes for sustenance. But the poor and needy and hungry traveler are also provided for. And gleaning was an important concept to the writer of Ruth, illustrated by the fact that the root word for *glean* appears twelve times in chapter 2. But gleaning could involve risk, so Ruth tells Naomi that she wants to seek the field of someone who will be kind to her.

Ruth and Naomi had nothing to eat, but there was a source of food. The field into which Ruth went to glean was a field of barley. She entered the field of a total stranger and was able to gather bread for the day.

John Keats immortalized the scene with his poem, “Ode to a Nightingale,” writing:

... the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

(Cited in the JPS Bible Commentary on Ruth, p. 30)

And yet the Book of Ruth gives no hint that Ruth longed for home. What *is* clear is that she is willing to go to work and that she earns the respect and welcome of a local landowner.

“It so happened” that the field Ruth entered belonged to Boaz. In verse 4 Boaz greets his reapers with a blessing: “The Lord be with you.” This godly man doesn’t ignore those under him, but brings God into his interactions with them. And the reapers in turn bless Boaz.

Then Boaz asks about the girl gleaning in the field. And the servant in charge of the reapers informs him that,

“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.” (2:6-7)

Perhaps this gleaning “among the sheaves” means gleaning among the grain that has already been bundled, and goes beyond the law or custom. If so, Ruth needs permission, and asks for it.

At that, Boaz presents himself as a guardian who takes an interest in the welfare of Ruth.

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.” (2:8-9)

Ruth is struck by the show of such kindness to her, “a foreigner.” Boaz tells her that he knows about her care for a relative of his, her mother-in-law Naomi. He then invites Ruth to a meal—free of charge. And he tells his workers to let Ruth glean without interference, even pulling some stalks out of the heaps and leaving them for her to gather.

What Ruth experienced in the field of Boaz that day was an expression of *grace*. That grace is like a Christmas present—a free gift, a present.

For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Eph.2:8)

We can experience God’s grace anywhere, but *ordinarily* we do so through the Word of God, the Sacraments, and prayer. Grace connotes God’s favor shown to sinners through Jesus Christ. It is free to us, but cost the death of God’s Son. A life of gratitude is the proper response to God’s grace. Likewise, a willingness to forgive, even as we have been forgiven.

Our Gospel Lesson from the first chapter of John declares that when the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, grace and truth were fully manifest. Jesus lived his life reflecting the grace of God—blessing children, healing sick people, welcoming outcasts.

It has been asked, “What makes Christianity different from all the other religions of the world?” Years ago that very question was discussed at a conference. Some of the participants

argued that Christianity is unique in teaching that God became human. But someone objected, saying that other religions teach similar doctrines. What about the resurrection? No, it was argued, there are other faiths that believe that the dead rise again. The discussion grew heated.

Then C. S. Lewis, a strong defender of Christianity, came in late, sat down, and asked, “What’s the rumpus about?” When he learned that it was a debate about the uniqueness of Christianity, he immediately commented, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”

Once when Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town, he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court. The judge asked, “Guilty, or not guilty?” When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, “That’ll be ten dollars — a dollar for every mile you went over the limit.”

Suddenly the judge recognized the famous minister. “You have violated the law,” he said. “The fine must be paid—but I am going to pay it for you.” He took a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! “That,” said Billy Graham, “is how God treats repentant sinners!” (*Progress Magazine*, December 14, 1992.)

When Ruth went into the field to glean, she had nothing; but there she found food, and kindness, and protection. And there hidden in the field was the presence of God, working in and through a man of standing and a humble young woman just trying to get something to sustain herself and her mother-in-law. Working in and through the laborers in the field. Working in and through the established law of gleaning.

My friends, as the church of Jesus Christ, we can be a field of grace for long-time members and first-time visitors. As we reflect God’s grace and truth. As we proclaim and hear and receive his Word. As we celebrate the Sacraments, as we pray with and for one another—at God’s throne of grace. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.