

The Plan

Ruth 2

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I tend to think of life as a journey, with beginnings and endings, twists and turns, forks in the road, and many, many stops and experiences along the way. The story of Ruth and Naomi has all of these things. Last week, we left the story with Ruth and her mother in law, Naomi, on the cusp of a new beginning. In the relationship between them, we saw that family is more than genetics. In the story, Ruth is labeled both Moabite and daughter. However, her faithfulness and “will not let you go love” for Naomi, not her ancestry, became a determining factor of her identity.

At this point in the story, the women had just arrived in Bethlehem, Naomi’s home. They were two women alone in a patriarchal world with no land, no food, and seemingly no future. Things were bleak, so bleak in fact that when Naomi was asked by the women in town, “Is *this* Naomi?”, she said, “Call me no longer Naomi (which in Hebrew means pleasant or sweet), call me Mara (which means bitter), for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.” This bitterness, of course, stems from Naomi, having left Bethlehem with a husband and two sons, and returning with nothing and nobody except her daughter in law, who was just as vulnerable as she was, maybe more so in light of her “otherness.” So, there they are. Now what?

“Now what?”, is often the million-dollar question. It’s the question we ask when we graduate from college, get our first apartment, bring that new baby home, receive a scary diagnosis, or lose someone we love. Now what? Have you had the experience of being stuck in “now what?” Right now, our country is full of young adults who have graduated from college, with tremendous student loan debt, and who are unable to get

a job that will allow them to live on their own, paying their own bills and beginning to pay off that debt. Many of them have had to return to their parents' home and they are asking, "Now what?" And at the other end of the age spectrum, as baby boomers age, there are an increasing number of senior citizens who, due to their health or mobility, are unable to live alone any more, but who can't afford assisted living or aren't ready to even go there. They and their families are asking, "Now what?" The truth is, we all find ourselves asking, "now what?", and the only way out of these times is to make a plan. It's tempting to wallow in "now what?" And it's okay to stay there for a little while but, we can't hang out there forever. A plan has to be made, even if it's not perfect and even if it's not the forever plan. Making a plan is moving forward.

And that is exactly what Naomi and Ruth did. They made a plan to provide for themselves in that time and place. I'm sure they hoped it wasn't going to be the forever plan. But before we get to that, chapter 2 begins with a note to us, the readers, from the narrator of the story. "Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz." So now we have information that Naomi and Ruth do not have. We know there is someone related to Naomi's dead husband, Elimelech, who certainly has the means to ease the suffering of the women.

Now, the plan, Ruth 2:2. "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." This might sound as if Ruth is planning to go and take someone else's grain. Well, she is, but it was expected. Jewish law (Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22) forbade Israelite landowners to strip their fields completely clean as they harvested their crops. Harvesters were supposed to leave the grain that was missed during the regular harvesting process for the use of the "poor" and the "resident alien" who had no land of their own

to cultivate. Ruth and Naomi's plan was for Ruth to find a field and collect the leftover grain alongside the other vulnerable people. Now, knowing the plan and also knowing the tidbit of information the narrator provided for us, any ideas whose field Ruth will find herself in by "coincidence?" If you guessed the field of the man related to Naomi's husband, you win! Once at the field, Ruth worked hard to gather grain to feed herself and Naomi. We as the readers are not surprised then, when Boaz, the owner of the field, showed up and right away noticed Ruth. Gesturing to Ruth, he asked his foreman, "Whose young woman is that?" The foreman responded, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi."

The foreman clearly wanted to draw Boaz's attention to Ruth's ancestral identity. He said it twice. We, having listened in on the story from the beginning, know what happened in the space between Moab and Bethlehem when Ruth vowed, "Where you go, I will go, your people will be my people, your God, my God." But the people of Bethlehem, the people in this field, have no idea. To them, her identity was based on her land of origin. She is still "the other." At this point in the story, we might ask the question, which point of identity is more important, her past...where she came from, or her present...who she is now?

This week, I was invited to speak at the Disciples Women's Brunch. They asked me to talk about my experiences with the women I meet with at the Inside/Out house. You will recall Inside/Out is an organization that helps women who have been incarcerated. They help the women get jobs, learn to manage money, recover from addiction, navigate the complicated web that is drug court, and they provide a safe place for the women to live. I invited the Director of Inside/Out, Denise Phelps, to join me for the brunch. She talked to the Disciples Women about what the organization does. But what I've found myself thinking about the most is the prop she used as she spoke.

She helped us understand that when people get out of prison, their identity is wrapped up in their past, what they've done, the choices they used to make. Denise put on a white jacket which she calls the jacket of shame. On it, are words like criminal, addict, failure, thief, worthless, and there is even a number, like a number an inmate would be assigned. The things on the jacket remind us of how the women see themselves and the way they think others see them too. Denise told us that each one of them wear an invisible jacket that tells them who they are. What we think of ourselves, our identity, and what we believe others think of us, affects our behavior. It affects whether we can look others in the eyes, and ourselves in the mirror. In the case of the women in the Inside/Out program, it affects whether they believe they really can continue to make the next right decision. What I do for Inside/Out is really easy. I tell them over and over again that they are loved by God, that they are so much more than their mistakes. And when they have days when they don't believe that, I tell them that's ok because God's opinion of us is un-affected by our thoughts, words, or actions.

In our story today, Ruth's identity, whether she is a Moabite or part of the family matter. Upon meeting Boaz he says to her, "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." Boaz's greeting, "my daughter", introduced the hope that he would claim her. In this passage, he gives 7 commands to Ruth. The commands make sense in the context of kinship. As a relative, she will be expected to stay close by...and she will be provided for. Boaz's instructions to Ruth are full of covenantal imagery. These words, like Ruth's words to Naomi in chapter 1, lay claim to family ties and the conditions of those relationships.

Ruth bowed to Boaz and asked him why he was extending this unexpected kindness to her. He revealed to her that he knew what she had done for Naomi. He knew of her love and faithfulness, her hesed, for her mother in law. So impressed with Ruth was Boaz, that he bestowed a blessing on her, "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!"

What a nice thing to say, right? Can we try, though, to hear a blessing like that through the ears of someone who is vulnerable in our world today? Think about it from the perspective of someone who has just been released from prison, without a job, in a world that seems to be moving much faster than it did when she went to prison...nowhere to live, no food in a cupboard. Imagine running into this person on the street, maybe that person is panhandling or digging through a trash can for food. Maybe she is sitting on the bench by the library. Imagine handing her a sandwich, fries and a bottle of water, and saying, "May God bless you with a job, a home and people who care about you." How does that play for you? I can tell you how it plays for people in that situation. It says to them, "I've done my duty. I gave you a sandwich. The rest is up to God."

Well, that's not how it works. And that's pretty much the point Ruth made when she said in verse 13, "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." In other words, I need YOUR help, your religious platitudes aren't particularly comforting to me. This is a good reminder for all of us of how our "church speak" can come across to others. I've been told by more than one person that statements like, "God bless you," or "I'll pray for you," ring hollow and cold to a hungry person's ears and heart.

Boaz responded to Ruth's nudge by inviting her to have a meal with his harvesters, by instructing his men to let her glean from the standing sheaves, to leave extra for her, and to refrain from scolding her. Boaz responded by providing food and safety for her. And with that, Ruth spent the rest of the day gathering grain. She ended the day with about half a bushel of grain which she took home to Naomi.

As you might guess, Ruth returned home to questions. Where did you go? Who did you see? When Ruth told Naomi where she had gleaned and that she had met the landowner, Naomi remembered Boaz and shared with Ruth that which we, as the readers already know...he is family. For Ruth and Naomi, in just one day there was an abundance of grain, and signs that an end to the years of famine and loss could be in sight. The chapter concludes with the end of the harvest, the narrator says, "So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests, and she also lived with her mother in law."

Last week, I mentioned that in order for something to begin, something else has to end. In chapter 2, Ruth's identity shifts from the "Moabitess from Moab" to "my daughter." She was a Moabite, a woman who was suffering and vulnerable. Now after her encounter with Boaz, he recognizes her as part of his family, someone who deserves special treatment. Because of their encounter, Ruth is in a better situation than she was before.

We can't help but notice, both Ruth and Boaz demonstrate characteristics of God. Ruth demonstrates God's hesed, "love that will not let you go" through her love and faithfulness to Naomi. Boaz demonstrates God's hesed in providing abundantly for Ruth, the Moabite. In Boaz's actions, we can see that the definition of God's people is broader than perhaps the people of Israel originally thought.

This reminds us that, perhaps, the definition of God's people is broader than we can imagine too.

The question I would like us to consider before I close is, "When we encounter another person, what do we recognize in them or on what basis do we determine who belongs and who doesn't? I want to suggest that the thing Boaz recognized in Ruth, based on her demonstrated intense love for Naomi, was the image of God. And that is the thing we must continually search for and recognize in others. Because when we do, it causes us to act differently toward each other. Boaz responded to Ruth in a special way because he saw something more than "the other." He saw something he recognized because it was in him too...the image of God.

So maybe that's where we need to end up today. Do you recognize the image of God in yourself? It is impossible to recognize it in others if we are unable to see it in ourselves. Do you really see the hand of God in your creation...how you were wonderfully made on purpose for a purpose? If you have an invisible jacket of shame or jacket of guilt or jacket of unworthiness or jacket of whatever, take it off. You are loved by God completely. Let that truth be the root of your identity. My prayer for all of us this week is that when we look in the mirror, we recognize the light within ourselves, the light that is the image of God. I promise you...it's there. Amen.