

“Blessings Received, Blessings Shared”

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First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: Luke 6:36-38

Old Testament Lesson: Ruth 2:1-18

“Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting better than we deserve.”¹ That’s what Ray Beeson says in his book titled “That I May Know Him,” and that’s what God says in his book that tells the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Last week, we began a sermon series on the Book of Ruth, and we saw how God calls us to perseverance even in the midst of loss and the uncertainties of life. We saw how Naomi, the wife of Elimelech and mother of two sons, was widowed when her husband suddenly died. Then she lost her two sons, who also died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to fend for themselves. Naomi was living at the time in the foreign land of Moab, so she decides to return to her home country of Judah, to seek God’s grace and mercy among her fellow Israelites. And despite Naomi’s insistence that her daughters-in-law stay in their home country of Moab, Ruth is determined to go back to Bethlehem in Judah with her mother-in-law Naomi. Of course, Ruth is also a widow, since she was married to one of Naomi’s sons who died. Despite their loss, these two women persevere. But to what end; what’s to become of them? And where is God in all of this?

Where is God when we are suffering loss, or struggling through life, or just trying to do the next right thing? How do we know what the next right step is, and what it is that God wants for us at any moment in life? That’s where we left off last week, and that’s where we pick up this week.

As the story of Ruth and Naomi unfolds today, if we look closely, we can actually see God’s hand guiding these two women toward a better a life. And through that, we can learn something of what it takes for us to move forward toward a better life in the sight of God.

The first thing we see from what we heard read today is the importance of taking that first, right step toward where God is leading us. After arriving in Judah with her mother-in-law Naomi, right of the bat, Ruth gets moving. She says, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.” And Naomi says, “Go, my daughter.”

¹ Ray Beeson, *That I May Know Him* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 37.

As it happens, Ruth comes “to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who (is) of the family of Elimelech.” Elimelech was the husband of Naomi who died and left her widowed. And so to some extent, Naomi & Ruth have found their way into the family fold. But if it weren’t for Ruth and her willingness to take that first, right step, both these women, these widows, would surely live and die all alone, poor and destitute.

So how did Ruth know to go out and “glean among the ears of grain,” as it says here in the Bible? How did she know that was the next right step in the eyes of God? Ruth knew it was the next right step because (a) it’s what other people in need were doing, gleaning.

Gleaning in the fields means picking up the leftovers after the field has been harvested. That’s what the Israelites did. Those who were poor and in need shared in the blessings of others who had land to farm.

So (a) gleaning in the fields was what others in need were doing – Ruth could see this – and (b) the act of sharing our blessings with others is what God has commanded. In God’s grace and mercy, God instructed the Israelites to leave enough leftover in the fields for foreigners living there and for those who were just passing through, so that nobody would go without. This is in Deuteronomy 24, verse 19, where it says, “When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field (a stalk of wheat or barley), you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.”

We do the same today. Even though most people are not farmers today, we still give a portion of our income to help the needy. And if you don’t do that, perhaps you ought to, because (a) it’s what people do for those in need, and (b) it’s what God commanded, what God would have us do. God wants you to participate in the grace and mercy of the Lord, both in the blessings you receive, and in the blessings you share with others. And if you give to this church, you already do participate in this way, in the grace and mercy of the Lord.

For example, we had a young man in his late teens/early 20s come to the church just about this time last month. He told Debbie our secretary he wanted to pray with the pastor; that his father had died recently. First thing he said to me was, “I lost a father.” *Lost a father*; that didn’t sound right. The second thing he said was I need \$45 for a hotel. Long story short, I didn’t give him any money. And when he pushed back about that, I reminded him that he told Debbie he wanted prayer, and that he never once asked me to pray with him. He only asked for money. That changed him. And he said, “Yes, I need prayer.” So I prayed for him, and we talked. We talked for real, with me doing my best to follow God’s leading in setting this young man on the right path. And he got it. In that moment he got that he is his own biggest enemy in life, that the choices he makes moving forward have to be about doing the next right thing, whatever it is that will keep him right with God. This young man from our community got something that day of more value than \$45. I told him that, and he agreed. He thanked me. And I said don’t thank me. I just say what’s on my heart. And he said to me, “That’s the father in you.” I told him I wasn’t a father, but that I have a Father in heaven who gives me the gift of fatherhood anyway.

Taking that first, right step. That's what leads us to the grace and mercy of the Lord. That's what leads us to receive blessings from God.

There's another lesson to be learned in this chapter in the life of Ruth the Moabite, this foreigner, this widow, this daughter-in-law of a poor, widowed Israelite named Naomi. Living in the grace and mercy of our Lord means having a hunger for what the Lord has to offer. Ruth hungered for what the Lord had to offer her.

When Boaz the landowner came to his field and saw this foreigner named Ruth taking food from his harvest, he asked about her. And he heard displayed a true hunger for the blessings of God. What Boaz hears about Ruth is that (quote), "She came (to the field), and she has been on her feet, from early this morning, until now, without resting, even for a moment." Ruth wasn't looking for a handout; Ruth was doing whatever it takes to show Boaz, God, and all the world that when it comes to seeking the grace and mercy of the Lord, she's no slacker.

Ruth has a hunger for what God has to offer. Do you? Do you hunger for what God has to offer you? Do we do whatever it takes to show God and all the world that when it comes to seeking the grace and mercy of the Lord, we are not slackers, that we will go that extra mile to help others and help ourselves?

That's what Boaz sees in Ruth. And seeing this, Boaz is happy to share the blessings he has received. We see this when mealtime comes around. Boaz says to Ruth, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." "So," says the Bible, "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.'"

Blessings upon blessings – Ruth not only got to glean from the field, she had whole bundles of wheat handed to her by Boaz's men. That's how God showers blessings upon Ruth the Moabite, the foreigner, the widow, this child of God who took that first, right step, having been led by the wisdom and example of others, in accordance with God's word, in accordance with how God would have us live as reflected in Holy Scripture, available to all of us, to read and to follow.

If you're not looking to others for wisdom and guidance, if you're not looking to the Bible for how God would direct your life – how God would show you the next right step – then let this be an example for you to follow. Follow the example of Ruth.

Ruth displayed a real hunger for the blessings that God would have for her and for all of us. Despite all the unknowns in her life – despite all the uncertainties in our lives – God is continually showering us with blessings. And all God asks in return is that, first, we receive these blessing that God extends to us, and second, that we share those blessing with others. It sounds so easy. And yet we struggle so much – both to receive and to share God's blessings.

Pastoral prayer

O God, we have but one life. We spend our days trying to save it, lengthen it, protect it and hold onto it. The truth is that life – real life – doesn't come from our human striving.

You, O God, are the creator and lover of all life, calling us to live in community with one another and teaching us to care for one another after the pattern of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.

We pray for those whose position and authority affect the lives of others. Inspire them with a vision of the community as it might be, where love of neighbor and concern for one another drive out discontent and strife, anxiety and fear.

We pray for those whose lives have been threatened or destroyed by those empowered to protect and serve. Our brothers and sister in Ferguson, MO, need your grace and mercy, O Lord, on both sides.

Help us all to work together with one heart and will, with sympathy and understanding, to serve the common good, to minister to people in trouble and despair, and to foster true joy and peace among us

Help us to see that you, Jesus, hold out everything we truly need and long for. Give us a longing and a hunger for you and everything that you offer.

We give over to you these, our deepest longings, and we lift up to you, this our greatest act of discipleship: to pray the prayer that you taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**