



Sermon Transcript

June 13, 2021

An Extraordinary God! An Ordinary People!

Love in Action

Ruth 2:1-23

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 13, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Ruth 2:1-23

1 Now Naomi had a relative of her husband's, a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. **2** And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor. And she said to her, Go, my daughter. **3** So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers, and she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech. **4** And behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem. And he said to the reapers, The Lord be with you! And they answered, The Lord bless you. **5** Then Boaz said to his young man who was in charge of the reapers, Whose young woman is this? **6** And the servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. **7** She said, Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers. So she came, and she has continued from early morning until now, except for a short rest.

8 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. **9** Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn. **10** Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner? **11** But Boaz answered her, All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told to 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** The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge! **13** Then she said, I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.

14 And at mealtime Boaz said to her, Come here and eat some bread and dip your morsel in the wine. So she sat beside the reapers, and he passed to her roasted grain. And she ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. **15** When she rose to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not reproach her. **16** And also pull out some from the bundles for her and leave it for her to glean, and do not rebuke her.

17 So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and

it was about an ephah of barley. **18** And she took it up and went into the city. Her mother-in-law saw what she had gleaned. She also brought out and gave her what food she had left over after being satisfied. **19** And her mother-in-law said to her, Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you. So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked and said, The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz. **20** And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, May he be blessed by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! Naomi also said to her, The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers. **21** And Ruth the Moabite said, Besides, he said to me, You shall keep close by my young men until they have finished all my harvest. **22** And Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, It is good, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, lest in another field you be assaulted. **23** So she kept close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

Introduction

We are making our way through the wonderful story of Ruth. And that is what it is. It is a story. There was a gentleman in my previous church who didn't like when I would refer to the narratives of the Bible as "stories" because in his mind he thought I was saying that they are nothing more than fictional stories, stories that really didn't happen. But that is not what I mean by "story." Mark Talbot reminds us that "stories are the stuff of everyday human life. They are so common that we often don't realize when we are living one."¹

Talbot asks us to imagine, for instance, it is early morning. You feel a twinge of thirst. You think about how you want to satisfy it. You decide you'd like a glass of orange juice. So you get up, walk to the kitchen, get a glass out of the cupboard, put it on the counter, walk over to the refrigerator, open it's door, spot the orange juice carton (sometimes I can't spot it, so I call for Bonnie to come and find it for me. She comes and rolls her eyes, reaches in and pulls it out for me! It is amazing how he can make it appear out of thin air!), reach for it, pull it out of the fridge, walk back to the counter, shake the carton, open it, pour some juice in your glass, close the carton, put it back in the fridge (where it is supposed to be), close the door, turn back to the counter, pick up your glass, and (finally!) take your first sip. Congratulations! You've just finished a very short story.²

One of the challenges that I feel when I preach through a story is that I can lose sight of

the fact that it is a story. It is so easy to reduce the story down to principles or lessons to be learned while forgetting to tell the story—or forgetting to let the story speak for itself. But the beauty of a story is that those lessons are illustrated and pictured for us . . . through the story. A story takes an abstract thought and makes it concrete. A story gives us a picture of what a principle looks like.

I told you last week that there are two key words to the story of Ruth: *go'el* which means kinsman redeemer and *hesed* which means steadfast love, kindness and faithfulness. Prior to this series, I would have said that of these two words, the key word for Ruth is *go'el* - kinsman redeemer. And this morning we are going to meet Boaz, who is the *go'el*, the kinsman redeemer. But that being said, I wonder if the key word to this book might not be *hesed*. While this word is only used three times in the book of Ruth it is the loving kindness of Boaz that leads him to be the *go'el*. In other words, *hesed* is love that moves Boaz to action as the kinsman redeemer.

I have read several articles about this important word *hesed*. All of the articles I read about this word are quick to point out that there is no English word that can fully capture the meaning of this Hebrew word. Daniel Block put it this way, “it is one of those Hebrew words whose meaning cannot be captured in one English word. When speaking of God it wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts, all the positive attributes of God—his love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty and Covenant faithfulness.”³ All these words are wrapped up in the *hesed* of God. So if no one word can capture it, how do you come to understand what the Hebrew word *hesed* means? You tell a story. You show what it means. Through the story of this *go'el* you discover what *hesed* looks like. Do you know what *hesed* looks like? It is a kind of love for God and others that moves a person to act unselfishly for the benefit of someone else. Simply put, *hesed* is love in action. You can see it. You can put your finger on it. You can point at it and say, “there it is!”

So as we watch the story of Ruth unfold, I want you to see it. It is beautiful. It is powerful. It is redemptive. It is restorative. While stories are the stuff of everyday life, we are reminded that we are all living under a grand story—God’s story. All of our individual and personal stories are part of that grand story. Because of the loving kindness of God extended to us through our “kinsman redeemer”—Jesus—we become a picture, a story, of what God’s *hesed* love looks like. That is what I love about Boaz and Ruth. They are ordinary people in an ordinary place during an ordinary time. But because of God’s *hesed* they are people of extraordinary character and their story restores a family, a nation, the world—reaching you and me.

Ruth: Act Two: An Ordinary Life and an Extraordinary Character

God's Favor

When we talk about *hesed*, loving kindness, it is good to start with God. This is basic to God's character. This is who God is. It is a word used to refer to God 245 times in the Old Testament and 127 times in the Psalms. It is the word God used to describe himself when he passed before Moses. God introduced himself to Moses in Exodus 34:5-7 by announcing of himself, "*The LORD, the LORD a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and **abounding** in steadfast love (hesed) and faithfulness, **keeping** steadfast love (hesed) for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin . . .*" I love those words *abounding* and *keeping*. This is who God is. It reminds me of what we saw in Romans 8 and the unbreakable chain of God's love for us. John acknowledges this same character of God in 1 John 4:8. Here he simply asserts, "*God is love.*"

As the story of Ruth 2 emerges, the *hesed* of God, his loving kindness and his favor is very present but it lurks behind the scene. Instead of God being introduced to us in Ruth 2, we are introduced in verse 1 to Boaz, a relative of Naomi, *a worthy man of the clan of Elimelech*. He is a man of great character. He is a man who reflects the character of God. In other words, we learn what God's loving kindness looks like by watching Boaz. I can't think of anything better to say about a person than that. What do people learn about God by watching my story and your story? Do they learn about the loving kindness of God by the way we treat others and talk to others?

If you recall from last week, Naomi returned to her hometown of Bethlehem after being gone for over ten years. It had been a hard ten years. During her time in Moab, she lost her husband and her two sons. During this same time, her two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Neither of them were able to conceive. When she returned to Bethlehem, she returned empty. She had no husband, no son, no prospect of a male heir to provide for her. Sure, Ruth had extended *hesed*—loving kindness—to Naomi and returned with her mother-in-law, but she too was a widow, barren, and to add to all of that, a foreigner. Many leaves had fallen in Naomi's life those past ten years.

But now here they are, back in the land and they need to eat. They need food. So Ruth says to Naomi, "*Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain . . . So she set out and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers.*" This is the first place where God's *hesed* begins to peek out from behind the scene. God had made provision in the law for the widow and the sojourner. In Deuteronomy 24:19 it says, "*When you reap*

your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back and get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow.” Then in verse 22, he gives the reason for this command. They knew what it was like to once be a slave, to be poor and in need when they were in Egypt. And so they were to allow the poor and the widow and the foreigner to come behind their workers and glean enough from their fields to eat. It is what James says is the essence of pure religion—caring for the orphan and the widow—the one who is need . . . *hesed*. This provision tells us about the *loving kindness* of God. Proverbs 19:17 says, “*Whoever is generous to the poor, lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.*”

So Ruth sets out to find a field where she is welcomed. She says it this way to Naomi, “*Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after him in whose sight I shall find favor.*” Not everyone welcomed the poor into their fields. Not everyone extended this kindness to the one in need. And so there was an element of danger and risk in what Ruth set out to do. And so she goes with Naomi’s blessing and the text says “*she happened to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the clan of Elimelech.*” This is fascinating. K. Lawson Younger says of the Hebrew here that the phrase *she happened to come* is two Hebrew words that literally mean “her chance, chanced.”⁴ In other words, on the human end of it you could say, “and by chance, by good luck . . . or luckily she ended in the field of Boaz.” But the way it is written, the author is winking his eye at you and saying “it just so happens” that she ends up in the field of Boaz. In other words, God is at work and it is God’s favor and God’s provision at work that leads Ruth to the field of Boaz . . . who “just so happens” to be from the clan of Elimelech. He is a “kinsman redeemer” who can provide for Naomi and Ruth.

I think this is how we often experience the *hesed* the loving kindness and favor of God. We experience it in our moments of need—when our leaves are falling—and it “just so happens” that our need is met . . . God’s favor. Or, at times, it is the hope of God’s favor that sustains us because sometimes we can’t keep the leaves from falling and there is no promise that everything will be made better. And yet, because of God’s loving kindness—his *hesed*—we know that even in these things he is being loving to us and his favor will be made clear to us in the end. I have been carried along lately by a quote I read recently in a book on prayer. “If God is sovereign, then he is in control of all the details of my life. If he is loving, then he is going to be shaping the details of my life for his good. If he is all-wise, then he’s not going to do everything I want because I don’t know what I need. If he is patient, then he is going to take time to do all this. When we put all these things together—God’s sovereignty, love, wisdom, and patience—we have a divine story.”⁵ It is a story of God’s favor, provision, loving kindness.

God's Touch

So what happened when Ruth was gleaning in this field? Let's look at the story. Boaz, the owner of the field shows up. Ruth 2:4 begins by saying "*And behold . . . or, 'wouldn't you know it' (another wink at the idea that God is providentially at work) Boaz came from Bethlehem.*" The first words we hear from his mouth reflect his character and his generous heart, he says to those whom he employs, "*The LORD be with you.*" And they in turn greet him with a blessing of their own, "*The LORD bless you.*" At least, by their words of blessing, God is present.

Immediately Boaz takes notice of Ruth and so he asks the foreman, "*Whose young woman is this?*" The foreman proceeds to tell Boaz that "*She is the young Moabite woman, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab.*" Being a relative of Naomi's late husband, I'm sure Boaz had heard of Ruth and what she had done for Naomi. The foreman attests to her character and indicates that she had asked permission to glean from what the reapers leave behind and she had been working diligently all day *except for a short rest.*

So Boaz turns to Ruth and says, "*Now, listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Let your eyes be on the field that they are reaping, and go after them. Have I not charged the young men not to touch you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn.*" There may be more happening here than what initially meets the eye. When Boaz suggests that she stay in his field and not go to another field to glean, it is possible that as Boaz came to the field, Ruth was on her way to find another field to glean from. Perhaps there was another field where she could possibly find favor. Why would she want to go to another field? The implication is that when Boaz told her to stick close to his servant girls and that he told his men to not harass her, that she had experienced something that made her feel unsafe and uncomfortable, most likely some kind of sexual advance was made towards her. And because he told her where to get a drink if she is thirsty, this unwelcomed advance probably happened when she took her break during the day. It is possible that the foreman was a bit embarrassed with having to explain to Boaz what had just happened to Ruth.

You can imagine how Ruth felt after Boaz assured her of his protection for her. It says in verse 10, "*Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?*" Boaz indicated that he had indeed heard of her story and what she had

done for Naomi and that God was repaying her for what she had done. He said in verse 12, *The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!* I like that picture because it is a reminder that often the touch of God's kindness comes from the touch of ordinary people like you and me. Often it is the simple things that God uses to touch people with his kindness through us. Notice what Ruth mentions in verses 13. Boaz comforted her. Boaz spoke kindly to her. Boaz treated her like she was one of his workers. Comfort. Kind words. Acceptance. Welcome. That is how you touch people with the *hesed*—the loving kindness of God.

But the kindness of Boaz didn't end there. When it came time to eat, he invited Ruth to eat among "his crew." Who knows how long it had been since she had eaten that well. It says that she ate until she was full and she even asked for a box to take home what she couldn't finish. And then, Boaz made sure that she was free to glean among the sheaves and not just the leftovers. In fact, he instructed that they pull out some bundles just for her to glean from and when she went home it says in verse 17 that she had *an ephah of barley*. That is not a measurement that naturally computes for us, but K. Lawson Younger suggests that this was probably a week's worth of food and if she continued to bring that much home for the rest of the harvest she would have close to a year's worth of food.⁶ It illustrated the extravagant kindness of Boaz towards Ruth. So she went home that day with the leftovers from her meal and a week's worth of food. God touched Ruth with his favor through the *hesed* the kindness of Boaz.

I think both Boaz and Ruth are held out as examples to us to teach us some of the ordinary ways we can be the means by which we touch people with God's kindness, the kindness of Christ. There are a few things I notice from the example of Boaz and Ruth. First of all, the simple things can be a reminder to someone that God is near. Carolyn Custis James observes that when all is well our senses can be dull to the presence of God's *chesed* in our lives. But when trouble strikes and you are sitting in the darkness with a heart that aches for God, the slightest sign of his presence is monumental. A load of grain, a cooked meal, a pair of gloves, a visit, help with some menial task sends a signal—faint though it may be—that God is here and God hasn't forgotten. It is like watching a heart monitor that had gone flat and all of a sudden there is a flicker of a pulse.⁷ So when you think of doing *hesed* for someone who is experiencing the loss of leaves . . . don't underestimate the simple and accessible ways you can be the touch of God's *chesed* to someone in need. The story of Ruth begins with a famine and Ruth 2 ends with full bellies. But Naomi at this point is still without her husband. Often the troubles of our lives lie side by side with God's *hesed*. He is there!

Also, notice where this expression of God's *hesed* is experienced. It is in the workplace. It is out in the fields where they are gleaning the harvest. And notice to whom this kindness is extended to. It is to the marginalized, the immigrant. Boaz extends kindness to the immigrant—he acts unselfishly for the benefit of the other. It is just a reminder to me that in every day places we are surrounded by every day people and in many of these cases a touch of God's *hesed*—his loving kindness would go a long way to let a person know that God is near. Make sure your antennas are up tomorrow. Who needs a sign of God's *hesed* in your everyday place?

And finally, I am reminded again of how the book of Ruth begins, *"In the days when the judges ruled . . ."* We noted last week that this was not a good time in Israel's history. It was not a time when God's kindness—loyalty to one another—was on display. But here you have Ruth and Boaz, pictures of godly character on display in a godless age. In a time when the culture around them is disintegrating and even in the midst of their own personal challenges, God's kindness shows through them. How timely is that for us? How we treat each other as God's people, as brothers and sisters in Christ, with *hesed* . . . loving kindness—is vital to us being the presence of Christ in the world.

God's Redeemer

This leads me to one more thought about God's *hesed* from the story of Ruth 2. Naomi must have been amazed with the amount of grain that Ruth brought back with her. After seeing all that Ruth brought home with her she asked, *"Where did you glean today?"* Ruth told her that she was gleaning in the field that belonged to Boaz. To which Naomi said, *"May he be blessed by the, whose kindness [hesed] has not forsaken the living or the dead!"* Through Boaz, God showed his kindness to Naomi because Naomi said, *"The man is a close relative of ours, one of our redeemers."*

While the book of Ruth tells a story, we should not lose sight of the fact that is a love story. And like all "good" Hallmark stories, Ruth 2 ends with a little tension. With the revelation that Boaz is one of their redeemers it probably caused Ruth to wonder what his intentions were, considering that he had been so kind to her. I am sure Naomi thought that as well. But the chapter ends by saying that Ruth gleaned through the end of the barley and wheat harvests which is a two month period. The chapter ends by telling us that Ruth was still living with her mother-in-law. This might cause the reader to wonder why there was no development in the relationship between Boaz and Ruth. Younger says, "While the provision of food is significant to their immediate need and somewhat beyond it does not solve the long-term problem of their destitute widowhood.

What appeared to be a promising relationship has evaporated.”⁸ Or so it seems.

It is a reminder to us that God’s greatest demonstration of *hesed*—loving kindness for us is in the work of Jesus and the cross. It is the work of our Redeemer. Many of us are familiar with Ephesian 2:8, “*For by grace you have been saved by faith.*” That word *grace* speaks of *favor*—and *favor* is what Ruth was looking for when she went out into the field to glean. But prior to verse 8, in verse 7, Paul talks about God *showing the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. Through Jesus God acted unselfishly for our benefit—he gave us his Son who died for us. This kindness that God has extended to us does not just “save me” and “get me to heaven.” It is a grace that forms my character—a character that demonstrates the kindness of God.

In Romans 2:4, Paul is insisting the church, given the pagan environment, must also keep from the sin of being judgmental, for when they judge others they are really judging themselves. In that context he makes an extraordinary statement that relates to the *hesed* character of God: “*Or do you despise the riches of his kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*” How do we despise the kindness of God? When we fail to reflect his character. When we fail to extend the kindness that we have been freely given.

The message from the story of Ruth is not just “be kind.” Rather, the message from the book of Ruth is that as you have received the kindness of God through faith in Jesus, let his kindness shine through your life. It is love in action. It is ordinary lives that have been touch by God’s kindness willingly extended to the one in need.

Conclusion

Carolyn Custis James observes in Naomi that both pain and love are present in this life, and the one does not eliminate the other. Good and bad. God’s *hesed* and heartache. Together. In the same picture.⁹

Heartache? Is that where you are this morning? Rest in the assurance of God’s *hesed* for you. I pray that you will experience in small ways reminders that God is near. I pray you have moments where you can say, “it just so happened . . . God’s favor came at the right time.”

Hesed—Love? Is that where you are this morning, resting in the fullness of the riches of God’s kindness expressed for you in Jesus, our Redeemer. If so, then look for ordinary

ways for God's extraordinary character to shine through your life so that you can be a blessing to others. Look for opportunities in everyday places with everyday people—and especially as brothers and sisters in Christ, let the kindness of Jesus so mark us that you can't help but conclude . . . God is near! I felt the touch of his *hesed* through the comfort, the kind words, the acceptance, the welcome of God's people.

An Ordinary Life and an Extraordinary Character

¹Mark Talbot "We Need Another Storyline to Put Ours in Perspective" www.crossway.org
September 4, 2020

²Ibid

³Daniel Block *Judges and Ruth, New American Commentary*, vol. 6 (Nashville: B&H, 1999) 605

⁴K. Lawson Younger *Judges/Ruth The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) 441

⁵Paul E. Miller *A Praying Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2017) 9

⁶Younger, 447-448

⁷Carolyn Custis James *The Gospel of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 120

⁸Younger, 450

⁹James 122

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Describe a situation or event in your life that you would describe as “a God-thing.”
“It just so happened . . .”
2. Are you most identifying with heartache or *hesed*? Why?



Diving Into The Word

Read Ruth 2:1-23. What catches your attention? What questions do you have?

What is *hesed* and how does it picture the gospel of Jesus?

What causes Boaz to join Ruth’s cause, and what does this tell us about the kind of man he was?

Why does Naomi revive when Ruth returns with surprising news?

Why is it difficult for Naomi and for you to believe God is overflowing with *hesed*?

How does Jesus reassure you of God’s love, even when your life is full of trouble?

Why is it important to hand on to both God’s providence and his *hesed*, no matter what our circumstances?



Taking It Home

What is one thing you are taking from your study?

Where is God calling you to extend his kindness?