



Sermon Transcript

June 20, 2021

An Extraordinary God! An Ordinary People!

The Interest of Others

Ruth 3:1-18

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on June 20, 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 3:1-18

1 Then Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? 2 Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do. 5 And she replied, All that you say I will do.

6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her. 7 And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. 8 At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet! 9 He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. 10 And he said, May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter. You have made this last kindness greater than the first in that you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsmen know that you are a worthy woman. 12 And now it is true that I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I. 13 Remain tonight, and in the morning, if he will redeem you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to redeem you, then, as the Lord lives, I will redeem you. Lie down until the morning.

14 So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another. And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor. 15 And he said, Bring the garment you are wearing and hold it out. So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her. Then she went into the city. 16 And when she came to her mother-in-law, she said, How did you fare, my daughter? Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 17 saying, These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said to me, You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law. 18 She replied, Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.

Introduction

Paul gives these instructions in Philippians 2:3-4. *“Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* Quite simply put, Paul is telling us to not be selfish. He is instructing us to be like Jesus who put the interests of others ahead of his own interest. It is a call to humility. It is *hesed* in action. . . loving kindness. It sounds good. It sounds attractive. *“Each one”* of us looking out for the other. But it doesn’t come natural. It is highly counter-cultural.

David Brooks, op-ed columnist for *The New York Times* captured the spirit of our age by calling us “The Big Me” generation. He said you can trace the shift in our culture that once encouraged people to think humbly about themselves to seeing themselves as the center of the universe. One way you can trace this shift from 1950 to 2005 is through a Gallup survey of high school seniors. In 1950, high school seniors were asked whether or not they considered themselves to be very important people. Only 12% of seniors surveyed felt that way about themselves. The same survey was given to the graduating class of 2005 where 80% considered themselves to be very important.¹

In that same year, 2005, David Foster Wallace gave his famous commencement speech at Kenyon College. Here he confessed, “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it is so socially repulsive. But it is pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard wired into our boards at birth.”²

This is not to suggest that the struggle with selfish tendencies is a new phenomenon. It is as old as the fall of man. Immanuel Kant noted that we are all built from “crooked timber.” He said, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”³ But it is humility that recognizes I am made from “crooked timber.” The shift in our culture is a shift that fails to see the “crooked timber” of our own hearts. It used to be that the highest good was *self-sacrifice*. But the narrative of our western culture suggests that now the highest good is *self-assertion*. In our culture, we are now told that we “find ourselves” not by self-giving to something outside of ourselves but rather through self-expression of something inside.⁴ When this way of life is lived out—as it is being lived out right now—it has devastating consequences. People get used. We end up with an inflated view of ourselves. Divisions widen. Systems of authority and structures that bring order collapse. And in the long run, it can’t sustain itself.

This is the opportunity presented to the church to be a witness to this “Big Me” generation. We can present something counter-cultural by the way we live out the ideal Paul sets before us in Philippians 2. This is the difference Christ makes in us. *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* The question before us is this. Will we be shaped more by the culture or more by the gospel? Will we be driven by *self-sacrifice*? Or, will we be driven by *self-assertion*?

What does this have to do with the book of Ruth? What does this have to do with Ruth 3? When I worked my way through this chapter this week, I was struck by how “each one” of the three characters of this chapter acted for the benefit of the other. Ruth 3 is an illustration of what Paul is saying in Philippians 2:4, *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”* And I am particularly mindful of how the actions of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz stand in contrast to the culture of the time of the Judges. Do remember how the spirit of this age was captured in the last verse of the book of Judges? It was said of that time, *“Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* And then, in the next verse, Ruth 1:1, the story begins by saying, *“In the days when the Judges ruled.”* In other words, the story that emerges through Naomi, Ruth and Boaz stands in contrast to the story of the world around them. Do we provide the same contrast to the world we live in today?

By no means do I want to lose sight of the story and the romance of Ruth 3. And there are a few cultural practices from that time period we need to understand to capture what is happening here. But I like what Carolyn Custis James says about the sexual tension we encounter down on the threshing floor that night when Ruth came to Boaz. She said, “that Yahweh’s people [God’s people] are perpetually confronted with difficult situations and hard choices. Will they be guided by self-interest or will *hesed* [loving-kindness] cause them to set aside self-interest and freely sacrifice for others?”⁵

What happens when in the context of difficult situations and hard choices—each one is thinking of the interests of others? What happens? That is what I want you to see. I want you to see the beautiful story that emerges when “each one” puts the other before self. Act 3 is broken into three scenes. Scene 1 has Naomi acting for the good of Ruth. Scene 2 has Ruth acting for the good of Naomi. Scene 3 has Boaz acting on behalf of the good of Ruth and Naomi. When that happens, it creates the kind of community our world longs to see and experience. It is healing. It is redemptive. It is restorative. It is *hesed*, loving kindness. It is a taste of what it means to know Jesus. *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

Ruth: Act 3 - An Ordinary People and an Extraordinary Community

Seeking Peace for Others

The first scene of Act 3 takes place between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. If you recall, Naomi and Ruth returned from Moab to Bethlehem “empty” after losing their husbands and having no male to provide for them. Needing food, Ruth went looking for a field where she could glean what was left behind when the reapers gathered up the harvest. And we saw last week that she “just so happened” to end up in the field of Boaz, a man of great character. But he wasn’t just a good man, he was also a close relative to Naomi’s deceased husband. He was a *go’el*—a kinsman redeemer. Being a close relative, he had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in danger or trouble or need. It is just like many of you would do for a relative in need, you would be there for them. Indeed, Boaz made his first step towards providing for Naomi and Ruth when he sent Ruth home with a week’s worth of food and an open invitation to glean with his servants during the remainder of the harvest.

Seeing the generosity of Boaz towards Ruth, Naomi comes to Ruth at the beginning of chapter 3 with a proposal. I love the way it is stated. It is stated in a way that indicates that Naomi is looking out for the interest of Ruth. She says to Ruth, *“My daughter, should I not seek rest for YOU, that it may be well with YOU.”* In the previous chapter, Naomi’s basic needs were already being met. Boaz had supplied them with an ample supply of food. On top of that, Ruth pledged herself to stay with Naomi and to care for Naomi when she vowed to go where Naomi goes and to die where Naomi dies. In other words, Naomi would not be left alone in her old age. But now Naomi turns her attention to Ruth and seeks what is best for Ruth. Ruth needs someone to provide for her and to care for her.

In the ancient world, safety and security and rest for a woman came through marriage. It is one of the reasons Naomi tried to convince Orpah and Ruth to remain in Moab and to not return with her to Bethlehem. She said to them in Ruth 1:9 that if they returned to their families in Moab they could possibly “*find rest*” in the house of a husband. The prospects of that happening for them in Bethlehem were slim. But seeing how Boaz was generous to Ruth, and knowing that Boaz was family, Naomi seized on the opportunity and gave these instructions to Ruth. *“Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he*

lies down, observe the place where he lies. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do.” Basically, Naomi is telling Ruth to let Boaz know that she is available for marriage.

Speaking for men, sometimes we have difficulty picking up signals. But Boaz would have no difficulty understanding the signal sent by Ruth. Approaching him while he was alone, the smell of perfume in the air, no longer looking the part of a widow in mourning, uncovering his feet while he was sleeping and lying down at his feet would no doubt indicate her intentions to Boaz. In fact, Naomi said, that her intentions would be so obvious that he would know what to do.

Carolyn Custis James suggests that there is a great deal of personal sacrifice on the part of Naomi by sending Ruth to propose marriage to Boaz. When she suggests that Ruth approach Boaz in this manner, she doesn’t mention him as a “kinsman redeemer” rather, she simply points out that he is a relative. As the story unfolds, we know that there is a closer relative who is the legal kinsman redeemer and so it is possible that Naomi has observed the good character of Boaz and she knows he would be best for Ruth—*“My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you.”* In other words, Naomi is more interested in getting Ruth a good husband than she is in finding the nearest kinsman redeemer. Carolyn Custis James says of Naomi, “The sacrifice Naomi is about to make is staggering by anyone’s imagination . . . Now, in the face of deepening adversity for Ruth, Naomi is willing to give up the only blessing she has . . . We are watching Naomi pour herself out for Ruth.”⁶ To what end? To what end does Naomi consider the interest of Ruth ahead of her own interest? It was so that Ruth’s needs would be met and so that Ruth might have rest and be well cared for. She gave of herself so that Ruth may have peace. *“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”*

Seeking Protection for Others

We shift now to the second scene of Act 3 and we find ourselves on the threshing floor with Boaz and Ruth. Ruth does what Naomi suggests. She goes down to the threshing floor where Boaz is keeping watch over his bountiful harvest. After celebrating the end of the harvest, he lies down and falls asleep. At this point, Ruth enters the room *“softly”* and she uncovers his feet and lies down. On one hand, this is a pretty intimate gesture on Ruth’s part. On the other hand, we know that both Ruth and Boaz have been portrayed as people of impeccable character, so nothing unseemly is happening here. And yet you can’t help but feel the tension that comes when romance is in the air.

You could say that Boaz got “cold feet” of another kind. The uncovering of his feet caused him to stir and he woke up and was surprised to find a woman laying at his feet. Rather startled, he asked, “*Who are you?*” And Ruth identified herself and then she said, “*Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.*” While the word “marriage” was not mentioned in her greeting, her intentions were quite clear. When she said, “*spread your wings over your servant*” she was asking for his protection that came with marriage. In Ruth 2:12, when Boaz met Ruth for the first time and told her that he had heard of the *hesed*—the loving kindness she had extended to her mother-in-law he said that God would repay her for her loyalty to Naomi and to God. And then he said this, “*the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*” In faith, Ruth had entrusted her life to God’s good care and protection. God was her refuge. But on the threshing floor, when she said to Boaz, “*spread your wings over your servant*” she was indicating to Boaz that he was the means by which God was going to protect her. It is probably one of the best “pick-up lines ever.” “Hi, my name is Ruth. You are God’s answer to my prayers!” (I don’t necessarily recommend using it.)

It is interesting that Ruth doesn’t completely follow the script Naomi laid out for her. Naomi told her to lay at the feet of Boaz and then let him make the first move. Naomi said, “*he will tell you what to do.*” But before Boaz could say anything, Ruth made her intentions clear. “*Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer.*” She was asking Boaz for the protection that comes with marriage. And it is very clear that she makes her appeal based on the fact that he is a *go’el*—a kinsman redeemer. By appealing to the fact that Boaz is a kinsman redeemer, Ruth is not just seeking marriage to a good man. As we will see next week, this will be a costly venture for Boaz. At his own cost, Boaz is committing to keep the inheritance of Elimelech in the family and to perpetuate the name of the family.

There was a lot of risk to what Ruth did that night. Boaz was not obligated to respond to her request. Her intentions and good character could possibly be questioned by being alone with Boaz. She was of humble means. She was a foreigner. And even the prospect of getting married again and facing the possible pain of not being able to conceive . . . all of these risks were in front of Ruth. But she did what she did with Naomi in mind. Naomi was looking out for Ruth. Naomi wanted a husband for Ruth. But Ruth was looking out for Naomi. By appealing to Boaz based on the fact that he was a *go’el*, a kinsman redeemer Ruth was seeking protection for Naomi and for Naomi’s inheritance and for Naomi’s family name. That is what happens when you put the interests of others ahead of your own interest. You bring protection, salvation. “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*”

Seeking Provision for Others

Finally, we see Boaz acting in kind. He too acts with *hesed*-loving kindness. He responds favorably to Ruth's request, however, there is a kinsman redeemer who is first in line. But Boaz is definitely interested in Ruth and so he says that he will go town first thing tomorrow and if the other guy is not willing to redeem her, "*then, as the LORD lives, I will redeem you.*"

So they get up early in the morning and Boaz gets Ruth out of there before anyone has the wrong idea of what took place on the threshing floor that night. As a demonstration of his devotion to Ruth, he doesn't send her home to Naomi empty handed. In fact, it is almost like a pledge—a down payment if you will—a promise that Boaz is making to ensure that they understand the nature of his intention. It is his intention to *spread his wings* over this family and to protect them. And so he sends Ruth back to Naomi loaded with provisions. He send her home with some of fruits of the harvest that he spent the night protecting. He sent her home with *six measures of barley*. In fact, he said to Ruth, "*You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.*" That is an interesting way to put it, considering how the story began. Do you remember how Naomi described herself when she returned from Moab to Bethlehem. She said of herself, "*Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara . . . I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.*" But now, because of the actions of Boaz, she is empty no more. "*You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.*"

I like how the chapter ends. Naomi said to Ruth in verse 18, "*Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today.*" David Schuman said of the Hebrew word for *wait*—that it "conveys the sense not only of waiting, but a worry-free attitude as she waits. Amid uncertainty, Ruth and Naomi wait for their redeemer to "settle the matter" and bring them rest."⁷ He will bring them protection. And as the supply of barley suggests, he will bring them ample provision. So here is Boaz pouring himself out for Ruth and Naomi and for Elimelech, and we will see more of this next week.

Jared Wilson made this observation of Boaz. "Boaz is that rare man who does things because God is real . . . Were it not for Boaz's larger-than-self vision, we would not have the story of Ruth . . . Against the dark backdrop of the book of Judges' lawless grotesqueries, in which every man did what was right in his own eyes, Boaz shines with the predawn radiance of God's glory in Christ."⁸ And so Boaz also illustrates for us what Paul calls us to in Philippians 2:4, "*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but*

also to the interests of others.” Naomi pours herself out for Ruth so that she may find rest and peace. Ruth pours herself out for Naomi so that she might find refuge and protection. Boaz pours himself out for Ruth and Naomi so that they may be redeemed and experience provision. It is ordinary people and an extraordinary community. When each one is looking out for the other, we experience peace . . . protection . . . provision.

Christ and His Church

Often when we walk through the book of Ruth, teachers and pastors and commentaries and bible studies are quick to draw the direct line that runs from Ruth to Jesus. The book of Ruth even does that for us at the end of the book when we learn—“spoiler alert” - that from the marriage of Boaz and Ruth comes the line of David, and of course, David takes us right to Jesus. But it is not just the genealogy that leads us to Jesus. The story of a kinsman redeemer readily leads us to our redeemer—it leads us right to Jesus.

I think of our passage this morning and the quick links we can make to Jesus. When Naomi seeks *rest* or *peace* for Ruth through encouraging her to go the threshing floor and to declare herself available to Boaz for marriage, we can quickly see the parallel to what Jesus provides for us. He is our peace. He is our rest. The catechism asks rather directly, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” That is another way of asking, “What is your only peace, your only rest in life and in death.” The answer is that “I am not my own, but belong body and soul to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

The same can be said about the “refuge” and “protection” that comes to us from Jesus. In Psalm 61:1-4 we have this wonderful prayer of David. *“Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer . . . Lead me to the rock that is higher than I . . . Let me take refuge under the shelter of your wings.”* This is the heart of Jesus when he weeps over Jerusalem and says, *“how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.”* And of course, we see his wonderful provision for us as we, like Naomi have been given a deposit of his promise to “settle the matter.” Our six measures of barley are like the Holy Spirit given to us as we wait for our day of redemption. It is a worry free waiting because we know that the day of our redemption draws near. Peace—Protection—Provision . . . these are all things that Christ brings to us.

But here is what is interesting about the book of Ruth. It is a story that shows God at work through the actions of people. For example, Ruth took refuge under God’s wings, but clearly Boaz was a tangible way God provided that refuge. We saw that when Ruth

said to Boaz, “*Spread your wings over your servant*” the author was conveying that Boaz was the means that God was providing refuge for Ruth and Naomi. In the same way, Christ makes his care for us tangible and felt through the care we extend to each other. In other words, “each one” puts the interests of others ahead of their own interest, we become an extension of the peace and the protection and the provision of God for one another. That why Paul says in Philippians 2:4, “*Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*”

I think this is what the world needs from the church right now. Our world needs to see what it looks like when *self-sacrifice* is of higher value than *self-assertion*. It is easy to point the finger at our secular culture and judge it for the way it has made individual freedom as the highest value. But it is a value that easily makes its way inside the walls of the church. More than our “morality” and more than our “rights” the world needs to see our *self-sacrifice* for each other because that is how we show them Christ—who made the ultimate sacrifice when he died for us. When we live by Philippians 2:4, *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*—we bring peace and we bring protection and we bring provision.

During the months of July and August, we are going to walk through several of the “one another commands” of the New Testament. They instruct us how to put the interests of others ahead of our own interest. Encourage one another—Love one another—Greet one another—Accept one another—Have fellowship with one another—Serve one another—Speak truth to one another—Show hospitality to one another—Pray for one another . . . If each one is doing this for the other, can you imagine how inviting that would be to a world consumed with itself?

Like Naomi and Ruth and Boaz, we as the church form an extraordinary community because through the spirit of Christ, we bring his peace—his protection—his provision through our *self-sacrifice*. May we be an alternative to the world around us. *Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.*”

¹David Brooks *The Road To Character* (New York: Random House, 2015) 6

²Ibid., 10

³Ibid., 11

⁴Tim Keller *Making Sense of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018) 120

⁵Carolyn Custis James *The Gospel of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) 147

⁶Ibid., 163

⁷David Schuman “The Story of Ruth and the Secret to Rest” www.thegospelcoalition.org
December 22, 2020

⁸Jared Wilson “Redeemed to Perpetuate a Name” www.thegospelcoalition.org August 22, 2014

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. How have you experienced the care of others from within the church? Did this care bring you peace, protection or provision? How so?
2. Describe a situation where you had to do something difficult, but you knew it was the right thing to do. What gave you courage (or prevented you from stepping out) to address the problem?



Diving Into The Word

3. Read Ruth 3:1-18

What stood out to you about the story of this chapter?

What do you think of Naomi's plan?

Why was Boaz the perfect choice for a husband for Ruth? What were the risks in approaching him?

What impressed Boaz most about Ruth and caused him to value her so highly?

How do Boaz's words to Ruth change our understanding of a woman's true value? How is this different from other messages we hear?

4. Read Philippians 2:3-8. How does Jesus impact our view of life and others?



Taking It Home

5. What are ways we can better sacrifice for the sake of others in the church?
6. Is there a need in the church that you can meet together as a group?