

Ruth 2

(Bethlehem – At Zion we have four boys in confirmation. They planned and led worship today at Zion. As part of the planning, we had a conversation about today's reading from Ruth to help me shape the message.)

This is going to be a fun year in confirmation. The four boys and I had a conversation about today's reading from Ruth to help me shape the message.

We talked about gleaning. Ruth was gleaning to get food for herself and Naomi. Gleaning is when people go through a field after a harvest and pick up what's left behind for themselves. Gleaning was essentially God's welfare system for the people of Israel.

Both Leviticus and Deuteronomy spell out God's law about gleaning. Here's Leviticus 23 verse 22:

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 leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God."

So the conversation in confirmation went something like this:

The first comment was, well that's not really fair. After all, Ruth and the other gleaners didn't do all the work to plant, grow and harvest the crop. And now they get some of the harvest?

The second comment – you're thinking too much like a capitalist. This is more like communism.

From there we had this amazing conversation about capitalism, communism, and God's economic justice. It is indeed going to be a fun year.

For the record, capitalism wasn't invented yet. The economy of the time did involve trade of goods, but nothing resembling capitalism as we know it existed. Same with Communism.

This system of gleaning was part of God's economics as laid out in the law first given to the people after the Exodus, maybe a couple hundred years earlier than this story.

God's justice rests on this simple truth – everybody needs to eat. And the community does better when everyone can.

It recognizes that not everyone is fortunate enough to own land or really own anything. Like women and children without a male relative, or those who are too poor to own.

Or in society where the first son gets the bulk of the inheritance, subsequent sons may be less able to provide for their families.

God's justice recognizes that the alien – or immigrant – also won't have what they need to live. So, gleaning is for all of them. Ruth fits the bill on every count – she's a widow with no source of support, and she's an immigrant.

The economy here isn't communist. But it is communal. It recognizes that It's in the best interest of the community as a whole for everyone to be able to eat.

Gleaning is one example in the story of how God works through people for the good of the community.

Ultimately that's the theme of the whole book of Ruth. God doesn't act in supernatural miraculous ways in this story. Instead, God works more behind the scenes for the good of Ruth and Naomi. And God does that work through other people.

This process of gleaning is how Ruth, and others, are cared for at a community level. But from here, the story zooms in on Boaz and Ruth.

First of all, there's this whole sort of coincidence that Ruth ends up in Boaz's field. Boaz, who just so happens to be a relative of Naomi's. Of course we're invited to see this, not as coincidence, but as God's care.

Last week I introduced the word *chesed*. It doesn't really have a good English translation, but it usually gets translated as steadfast love and mercy, or loving kindness. Love in action is another one I like. It's usually used to describe God.

But when Ruth declares her faithfulness to Naomi and leaves her homeland of Moab to travel to Bethlehem with Naomi, she is showing that *chesed* to Naomi.

Now, Naomi returns that *chesed* to Ruth. And Boaz, super impressed with Ruth's faithfulness to her mother-in-law, showers *chesed* on Ruth.

It is through these interweaving connections that God is showering them all with God's own chesed.

This is how it's supposed to work. God's law has more than one purpose – sometimes it forces us to see where we have fallen short and how we need God's mercy.

But its original intent was to order a community of people so that all were cared for and where all could live in peaceful relationship with God and each other.

This really is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. It's going to end up with a joyful ending and lots of hope. We all know that some of the biblical stories are more difficult. Job and Ecclesiastes come to mind.

And there are plenty of biblical stories that tell of God's big cosmic works...creation, parting the sea, incarnation, miracle stories that display a power beyond earthly power.

But there are many other stories that show God's work through the ordinary, everyday life of ordinary people...things like planting and harvesting...gleaning and caring for one another, especially the poor...welcoming the alien...providing for widows and children.

Naomi recognizes that God is at work. God is working to turn the despair and bitterness of Naomi's past into a hopeful future.

God began that work through Ruth and her faithfulness. Now God is working through the kindness of Boaz. God works through an economy that was designed to take care of people like Ruth and Naomi.

Sometimes it's hard to put ourselves into the biblical stories. We can't imagine doing things the apostles did – speaking a foreign language we've never learned, converting 3000 people through a powerful speech, miraculous healings, casting out demons.

But we can relatively easily put ourselves into the position of Ruth or Boaz. We have already all experienced God working through people in the ordinary stuff of life. Parents and other adults who cared for us growing up. Farmers growing food for themselves and others. We have cared for children or elderly parents or animals or gardens.

Some of us have worked at Matt Talbot or the Center for People and similar organizations. We practice kindness in everyday dealings with people in our jobs, or school...or treat cashiers and servers with dignity and kindness. God works through us when we welcome immigrants and feed the hungry.

This story is a little slice of life in the community God created and continues to create. And our story is a little slice of life in a community where we care for each other and together care for our slice of the world.

Today we are baptizing two babies – Emmett at Zion and Breslyn at Bethlehem. They are born children of God like all of us. And now in their baptism they are adopted into this community.

We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, who is the fulfillment of the life God intended for all creation. At baptism we become a part of that community of mutual care and living life together.

We live in a world where at the click of a button we can read or watch videos about all the bad stuff that is happening all over the world...sometimes in places we've never heard of.

We get caught up in an internet connected world where we can see the workings of the minds of powerful people on social media.

We get frustrated by things happening on the national stage and can feel helpless. Of course some of us may be called to work at that level. And we are all called to speak for justice on behalf of the vulnerable.

But most often where the strongest hope can be found is closer to home. In the Naomis and Ruths and Boazes of our time. Faithful people working to make life better for those in our communities.

And the amazing thing is that we are those faithful people. Through us, however small we might feel next to the enormity of the world's problems, God will work, one small action at a time, to show chesed to the world.