

Hungry in the House of Bread: Kindness
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
December 8,2019- AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Ruth 2

Last week we began in emptiness. Ruth and Naomi came trudging into Bethlehem after their long journey. They are homeless and hungry. Hungry in the house of bread. Hungry in Bethlehem. Bethlehem means 'house of bread.' At the end of the chapter Naomi had pretty much given up. She'd named herself after her sadness: "Just call me bitterness," she said, "Because bitterness is who I am."

This sets up the two questions of the book of Ruth, and they are: 1. What will happen to Naomi? Will her emptiness be filled? 2. How does a child of God live in a season of emptiness? How do we live in the face of loss and tragedy? Remember those questions as we read Ruth 2, I think you will hear that we begin to get an answer to question one. Naomi starts the passage in emptiness, but she's not completely empty at the end. Nevertheless, I would say that our chapter is still more concerned with question two. How does a child of God live in the face of emptiness? When life makes no sense and God seems nowhere to be found, how do you live?

Something is happening here. At the end of chapter one, as far as Naomi could see, the only thing holding her against the emptiness of her life was her daughter in law. Ruth's stubborn promise not to leave was her only stay against chaos. So, her circle of hope seems only as big as Ruth's clinging hand. But now the circle of hope is growing. If chapter one painted a picture of an empty wasteland in a chaotic time, chapter two takes us into Boaz's field, and that field turns out to be a circle of hope in the middle of the wasteland. In the middle of the chaotic time of the Judges, Boaz's field becomes this haven of rest.

What opens up this hopeful circle? What does God use to create this gracious space? I think the answer is human kindness. This field is full of kindness. And by the practice of this simple human virtue, God opens up a patch of holy ground, a garden amidst the world's wide wilderness. How does a child of God live in the face of emptiness? Chapter two suggests that we can practice kindness. I want to look at the features of the kindness that God uses to make this garden of hope, and I want to highlight two features of the kindness practiced in Boaz's field.

First, the kindness in Boaz's field has the quality of attention. Boaz's kindness is attentive to the need of people who would usually go unnoticed. In verse 10, Ruth acknowledges the attentive of Boaz's kindness. "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you should notice me—a foreigner."

Ruth was not easy to notice in the field that day. She was a marginal person. She was a woman. She was a foreigner. But she also would have been physically on the margins. Leviticus 19 said that Israelites were supposed to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so that foreigners and the poor could come in and glean. So Ruth would have been working out at the edges. It would be easy to miss her. It would be easy to ignore her. But Boaz notices her and he doesn't just notice her, he pays attention to her. Who's that girl? What's her story? What are her needs? The attentive kindness of Boaz is so remarkable that Ruth is taken aback. "Me!? You notice me?!" The first move of kindness is caring attention. In a lonely and hostile world, it is so good to be noticed. To have someone say your name and to ask how you're doing.

I went to elementary school in a small Christian school of about 120 people. I knew everyone and everyone knew me. It was wonderful. There was no Christian High School in my town so I ended up going to the public high school, Frontenac Secondary School. Out of the student body of 1500 kids, I knew about 10 of them. And to make matters worse, I was either the smallest or tied for the smallest kid in the school. I was 5'2" and 90 pounds. Every night I prayed for puberty. The adjustment wasn't easy. It felt like hostile territory. I felt like a foreigner. I plowed through the hallways with my head down and tried not to get in anyone's way.

My French teacher that year was Madame Miolee. Madame Miolee was a tiny, spunky person. She wore high heels every day and even then she was only 4'11". She had a kind face and a thick French accent. She was a well-liked teacher who paid attention to her students. About 2 months into the school year, I was about to leave class when Madame Miolee stopped me and she asked me to stay after class. "Uh Oh," I thought, "What did I do?" But when the rest of the class left I realized that she was not angry, she was concerned. She said to me, "Peter. I am worried about you. Are you OK? You seem sad and quiet. Is everything all right? Is something going on at home? I want to make sure you are all right." It was so kind of her to notice me. It was

so kind of her to ask that question. Of course, I told her I was fine. I certainly wasn't going to tell her about my puberty prayers. But she told me I could talk to her if I ever needed to. I never talked to her, but it felt good to know that in the middle of the high school chaos, someone noticed me and there was an island of kindness, and I could go there if I needed to.

The first move of kindness is caring attention. Boaz sees Ruth and he asks about her. He moves towards her weakness. And that attention starts to open up a space of hope in the middle of the chaos.

So the kindness in Boaz's field opens up gracious space by showing caring attention. It also opens space by doing a little extra. See there are two kinds of kindness. There is kindness that does what's expected, and there is a kindness that does a little extra.

What's expected kindness? That's when you do the acts of care and concern that are expected of you. Expected kindness is like paying the tip on your restaurant bill. Is it nice to leave a tip on your restaurant bill? Yes, it's nice. But it's expected. Social convention dictates that you leave a tip for your waiter or waitress. Expected kindness is flowers or some sort of gift for your beloved on Valentine's day. The flowers are a nice gesture, but it's expected. Expected kindness is important. There are lots of hurting people in this world, a lot of lonely people who would be over the moon if people showed them expected kindness.

If flowers for your beloved on Valentine's day is expected kindness, extra kindness is flowers for your beloved on an ordinary Tuesday. You know your spouse has a busy intense day at work. So you make plans to get home before them. You put flowers on the table and you cook a nice meal so that when they walk in the door they can just crash and relax. It's not Valentine's Day. It's not their birthday. It's just Tuesday. That's extra kindness.

This story is full of people doing much more than expected kindness. This story is full of people doing extra. Ruth promises never to leave her destitute mother no matter what. That's not expected kindness, that's extra. For the sake of her Mother-in-law, Ruth gleans in the fields and, as verse 7 tells us, she barely takes time to rest. That's not expected kindness, that's extra. Boaz tells his men to drop a few sheaves of barley in Ruth's path so her day would be a success. That's not expected kindness, that's extra. Boaz allows Ruth to sit at lunch with the men and share their bread and drink their water. That's not expected kindness, that's extra. Expected kindness holds things in place. Expected kindness helps maintain civility and basic decency. Extra kindness is generative. It lifts up those who are bowed down, it turns weeping into gladness, it makes fearful hearts strong. Extra kindness opens up hopeful space in the midst of emptiness. Extra kindness changes lives.

There's a reason for that: extra kindness is God's kind of kindness. Although with God we don't usually call it extra kindness. With God we usually call it grace. Grace is God's extra. God doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, instead He forgives our iniquities and remembers our sins no more. That's not expected, that's extra. God does not give us what we expect in life, instead He gives us infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. That's not expected, that's extra. God does not leave us to drown in the mess we've made of this world, instead, for us and our salvation, He sends His one and only son to us at Bethlehem. Jesus becomes a vulnerable child in a manger, and He shares our life so that we can be saved. That's not expected, that's extra. Grace is God's extra and that Grace has opened a circle of hope for us in this world. We take refuge in that hope every day.

Our passage actually gives us a really big hint that all this kindness has its origin in God. Ruth comes back to Naomi and tells her about what happened that day, she shows her all the grain, and Naomi says to her, "The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing His kindness to the living and the dead!" Do you know the Hebrew word for kindness there? It's hesed. That's the Hebrew word for the covenant love of God. It shows us that Boaz's kindness is bigger than he thinks. Boaz drops a little grain for Ruth and thinks he's just helping out a couple of hungry women. But by the time this book ends, we will see that God is using Boaz's little bit of kindness to fulfill His covenant promises. So when Ruth does a little extra for her mother in law, when Boaz does a little extra for Ruth, when we do a little extra for each other, all that extra is part of God's great extra through which He is making all things new.

There's one more thing in this passage that connects Boaz's small acts of kindness, to the great covenant love of God. Ruth is from Moab, and Israel is not on friendly terms with Moab. They have a bad history. When Israel was travelling through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, Moab would not let them pass through their territory. They made Israel go all the way around. They refused to give them food or water. Look up Deuteronomy 23:3 and you will see the fallout from that refusal. Moses tells the Israelites that no Moabite should ever enter the assembly of the Lord. Don't make a treaty of friendship with them!

‘Those Moabites refused to give you food and water when you came out of Egypt! So go ahead and be nice to Edomites, but no bread and no water for those rotten Moabites.’

But what happens in Ruth 2? When Boaz allows this destitute Moabite girl in his field, what does he give her? Bread and water. He gives her the food his people had been refused hundreds of year before. He gives the bread of grace to his enemy. He turns the other cheek. Do you see how what Boaz does in his field foreshadows Jesus? Specifically, do you see how what Jesus does foreshadows what Jesus does at this table. Boaz gives bread to his enemy. We give Jesus our rebellion, and in return, at this table He gives us His body and blood. We are still sinners, and He dies for us. At this table, our redeemer offers us bread that is way beyond what we deserve. And through this kindness, Jesus has opened for us a circle of hope in this world. So come inside this circle of hope. Come to the table, taste His bread, and remember that you are securely held in the circle of His love.

© Rev. Peter Jonker