

Ruth 2:1-3:13

Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent man of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. Ruth said to Naomi, 'Let me go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain.' She said to her, 'Go, my daughter.' So Ruth went and gleaned in the field behind the harvesters.

As it happened, she found herself working in the part of the field belonging to Boaz. Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem and asked his servant, 'Who is that young woman?' The servant answered, 'She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi. She said, "Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters." She has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.'

Boaz said to Ruth, 'Listen, my daughter, don't go and glean in another field, but stay here close to my young women. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and get a drink.' She said to him, 'Why have I found favour in your sight, that you notice me, a foreigner?' Boaz answered her, 'I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband – how you left your native land and came to live with a people you did not know. May the Lord reward you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!'

At mealtime Boaz said to her, 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.' So she sat down with the harvesters. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. When she got up again to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, 'Even if she gleans among the standing sheaves, do not embarrass her. Rather pull out some stalks for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to pick up. Do not rebuke her.'

So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered and it was about twenty litres. She carried it back to town and showed Naomi, who asked her, 'Where did you glean today? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.' So Ruth told her, 'The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz.' Naomi said, 'The Lord bless him! The Lord has not stopped showing kindness to the living or the dead! That man is our close relative, one of our kinsmen.' Ruth continued gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests. ...

One day Naomi said to Ruth, 'My daughter, should I not find a home for you, where you will be secure? Is not Boaz, with whose young women you have been working, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley at the threshing-floor. Now wash and perfume yourself and put on your best clothes. Go down to the threshing-floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.' Ruth said to her, 'I will do whatever you say.'

So Ruth did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk and was in good spirits, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then Ruth came quietly and uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled him and he turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!

'Who are you?' 'I am your servant Ruth. Spread your cloak over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.' 'The Lord bless you, my daughter. This kindness is better than what you showed earlier. You have not run after the younger men, whether poor or rich. Now, my daughter, do not be afraid. I will do for you all that you ask, for all my fellow townsfolk know that you are a worthy woman. Although it's true that I am near of kin, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. Stay here for the night and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do so. If he is not willing, then as surely as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until morning.'



Vulnerability ... comes in many guises ...
... it may be medical conditions that afflict us
... our age or gender
... taking the risk of speaking honestly how we feel

Vulnerability may also arise from our social position ... whether we are a single parent,
or a refugee,
or an indigenous person.



In the era of the OT, widows were especially vulnerable, unless you had male heirs who might look after you. The Hebrew word for widow (***almanah***) literally means one who is **silenced** or **bound** and thus unable to speak and unable to advocate on their own behalf – completely at the whim and mercy of others.

For Ruth it is even worse, of course, as she is a widow but also a foreigner, someone who is considered a stranger or an alien, someone with no power or agency, again completely at the mercy of others.

So, as widows, Naomi and Ruth have to be both shrewd and courageous, just to survive in what was most definitely a man's world.

They arrive in Bethlehem at a good time, however, at the start of the barley harvest – for the OT law of gleaning was one way of ensuring that the poor got a small share of the harvest:

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 crop. ... Rather you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. (Lev 19:9-10)

This law comes in the same chapter that speaks of loving your neighbour, which Jesus cited as the most important commandment of the law along with loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.

So one way that Ruth and Naomi can support themselves is by gleaning the harvest, gathering up the grain that is left behind by the harvesters. Ruth goes to the grain fields to glean.

As it happens, Ruth finds herself in the field belonging to Boaz, who happens to be a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's now dead husband, and who happens to also be a wealthy and prominent man in Bethlehem.

Is all this just a happy coincidence?



The language suggests that there is more going on here ... that God is at work behind the scenes, guiding Ruth to this particular field owned by this particular man.

And who should arrive from town at just the right moment but Boaz himself ...

One of his first questions is ...

‘Who is that young woman? Who is she related to?’

When Boaz learns that the woman is the Moabite who came back with Naomi, he takes an interest in her welfare and demonstrates practical kindness – she is allowed access to the drinking water, to food at lunchtime and to protection from the male workers.

Ruth is surprised to receive such kindness and bows at Boaz’s feet. She asks why Boaz should show any interest in her – as she is a foreigner. Boaz responds by saying that he’s heard about Ruth’s story ... how she has remained loyal to Naomi, how she has supported Naomi, and the courage she has shown coming to a foreign land and putting her trust in Israel’s God, under whose wings she has now come for refuge. Boaz goes beyond what is required in the gleaning laws and asks the workers to deliberately pull out some of the grain stalks from the collected harvest for Ruth to pick up.



Oh how I wish that Australia had a few people like Boaz in the Immigration Department in Canberra! People who might look and act with kindness on those fleeing from Afghanistan, for instance, those who helped Australian soldiers and embassy staff and who are now seeking protection here for themselves and their families. The government has agreed to accept 3,000 such refugees but there are at least 20,000 who need our direct help urgently.

Ruth returns that night to Naomi with an ephah of grain – around 20 litres! And with news that the field in which she gleaned is owned by Boaz, who showed her great kindness. Naomi’s bitterness is starting to lift – surely this is God’s hand at work, providing for her and Ruth.

I suspect we all tend to pray more often and more fervently when things are going badly. But it’s equally important to pray and give thanks to God when things are **going well**.

We have much to be thankful for despite the disruptions and anxiety caused by Covid. ...

We have vaccines to protect us against serious illness caused by Covid ...

and now many aspects of our lives are slowly returning to normal.

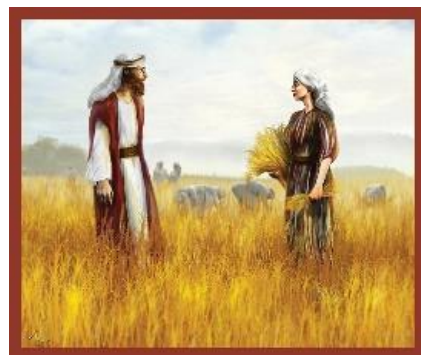
We’ve had good rain recently and our gardens are thriving.

We can see our family and friends again.

So many blessings! So many reasons to thank God.

But for Naomi and Ruth, their lives are still precarious. They have no long-term security and need a plan to prompt Boaz to act for them as a kinsman.

The role of a kinsman or kinsman-redeemer, as outlined in the book of Leviticus, is to help anyone of your kin – your family – who falls into difficulty. The difficulty envisaged is mainly financial – the kinsman shall buy back or redeem property they have sold or offer hospitality if required or even redeem their freedom if they have sold themselves as



a slave. Boaz has shown kindness to Ruth in allowing her to glean in his fields but has not – thus far – taken any of these further steps.

So Naomi hatches a plan. Make yourself look beautiful, Ruth, put on your best clothes and some perfume and then creep down to the threshing floor when all the men have been drinking and note where Boaz is lying down. Then go and uncover his feet and lie there until he tells you what to do.

What could possibly go wrong with a plan like that ...?!

Whatever the merits of the plan, there was so much that could go wrong!

It took great **courage** and **vulnerability** for Ruth to enact the plan.

But amazingly the plan works!

Boaz stirs in the middle of the night and is surprised and shocked to see Ruth there at his feet and asks who she is. For the first time, Ruth uses her name with Boaz and asks him to act as her kinsman redeemer.

It is an intimate and vulnerable moment ...

Boaz could easily take advantage of her or embarrass her or beat her.

But he does none of these things.

Rather, he speaks kindly to Ruth and assures her that he will act on her behalf that very same day.

The story is not quite done but the signs are now hopeful.

The loving and devoted and faithful Ruth has encountered and challenged the equally faithful Boaz, who now has impetus to act.

Next week we'll see how the story resolves.

For me, there are two clear lessons from this section of the story ...

First is **the courage it takes to be vulnerable**.

Our natural instincts and our culture often regard vulnerability as **weakness** or as inviting **rejection**.

Better to appear strong and fully in control and keep our emotions firmly hidden away.

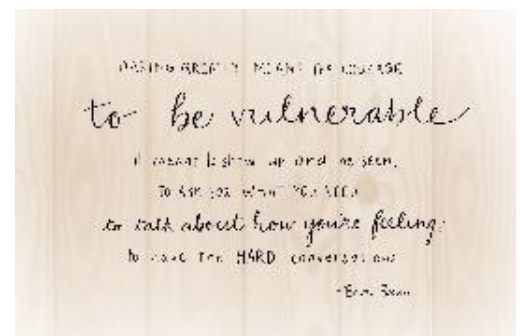
According to social researcher Brene Brown, this common way of thinking about vulnerability means that we stay **disconnected** from one another and living in **pseudo community**, where we are 'nice' to each other but our relationships remain shallow.

The rarer and more challenging option is to be prepared to make ourselves vulnerable – as Ruth does – which requires courage and the possibility of pain and rejection – but which also leads to much stronger connections between people and the possibility of real compassion – as Boaz demonstrates.

The second lesson is that God is at work in our everyday lives if we have the eyes of faith to see it. ...

Ruth just happens to visit the field of Boaz, who happens to just be arriving from Bethlehem.

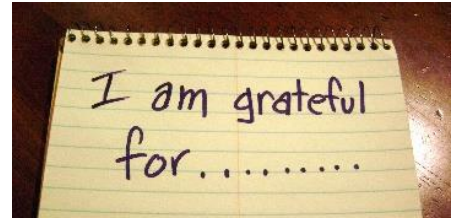
He happens to be a generous and compassionate person who blesses



Ruth.

He also happens to be in a position to help Naomi and Ruth towards a more secure future.

God blesses us every day in so many ways yet we often don't notice or pause to be thankful. A good spiritual practice is to spend a few minutes at the end of the day naming what we are thankful for. You might like to write one thing down for each day.



The next song encourages this attitude of being aware of and naming the many blessings God brings us every day.

SONG All of life is filled with wonder (to tune Ode to Joy TiS 152)

All of life is filled with wonder, so we thank you, God of love,
for the crash of evening thunder, clearing clouds, then stars above;
for the night that turns to glowing as we feel the morning mist,
God, we praise and thank you, knowing every day we're truly blessed.

For the joy of daily waking, for the gift of each new day,
for the smell of fresh bread baking, for the sound of children's play,
for the ways we seek to serve you as we work and volunteer,
God, we humbly praise and thank you for your presence with us here.

For the ways we're blessed with plenty, love and laughter, neighbours, friends,
nature's wonders, season's bounty, life in you that never ends,
for the ones who've gone before us, giving witness to your way,
we rejoice in all you give us every moment, every day.

For your love in times of trouble, for your peace when things are tough,
for your help when hardships double, for your grace that is enough,
for a stranger's gentle kindness, for a doctor's healing skill,
God, we thank you that you bless us, and you bless your world as well.

For the baby in the manger, for the cross and empty tomb,
for each time a searching stranger finds at church a welcome home,
for your kingdom's great surprises, poor ones lifted, lost ones found,
God, we thank you! Hope still rises, for your gifts of grace abound.

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