

## **“Don’t Cut The Corners”**

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Ruth 2:15-19

When we take it upon ourselves to read the ancient Old Testament scriptures from generations of time before Jesus, we read of treachery, trickery, war and threats of war, exile, destruction, and genocide. We read of stories where brothers kill each other for power, and ruthless kings and unsavory characters that swindle, lie, and cheat.

Certainly sprinkled in among these stories are also stories of good news and grace. That is what has these stories stand out among history’s literature.

While there is certainly dramatic tension in the plot, the story of Ruth stands out as one of the rare stories where compassion, integrity, generosity and goodness take center stage. It is a story that even includes some romance.

It is a story that some have called a rare island of tranquility among the stories of the Old Testament, where kindness between people is celebrated and the story weaves to a happy ending.

Perhaps the book of Ruth could fit neatly into the template of a Hallmark movie.

Maybe some of you haven’t heard the story of Ruth. It is a little four-chapter book that can be missed, tucked into the Old Testament between the writings of Judges and 1 Samuel.

To understand the story, it is helpful to recognize that the culture and expectations of life in Ruth’s day were very different than in ours. In those days if a woman’s husband died leaving her a widow, she had almost no way to support herself or survive if she didn’t remarry. She often resorted to begging on the street or becoming a prostitute simply to survive. Widows could easily die homeless and penniless.

In many Middle Eastern societies in those days there was an obligation for a family member, usually a brother of the man who died, to step forward to marry the widow to prevent her from a destitute life. Then she would need to give birth to a boy, who would carry on the family line.

This is the backdrop to the story of Ruth which probably was written after the time of King David, or roughly 1000 BC.

The story begins with a famine in the land of Judah, around Bethlehem. Famines were common and very difficult seasons to endure. Most of the time famines occurred when a lack of rain or other weather conditions impacted the crops and food supply. There wasn't so much a system of international trade like we have today to sustain people and many died of starvation.

The people of Judah looked out over the Dead Sea to the land of Moab and knew that there was food available over there because the climate was better. However, the Moabites were enemies of Israel.

Have you ever been so desperate that you got over your dislike of someone to ask them for help? That's what Naomi, her husband Elimelek, and their two sons did to prevent starving. They humbled themselves and went to Moab.

While there, they settled into the community and the two sons even married Moabite women. Then tragically Naomi's husband and both of her sons died. We don't know how, maybe in war, but this left all three women as widows.

They heard that the famine had ended in Judah, so Naomi encouraged both of her daughters-

in-law to return to their families who could support them in Moab and she would return to her people in Judah. One took her advise, but the other, Ruth, insisted on going with Naomi.

Certainly Naomi was concerned about Ruth because of the tension between Moab and Judah as well as being a widow apart from her biological family, but Ruth had an undying commitment to Naomi.

Ruth said, *"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried."*

Have you ever encountered that kind of commitment from another? No matter what the circumstances, Ruth's loyalty to Naomi was not going to waver.

But how would they live? Who would support them? These were questions that weighed heavy on their hearts. But no matter what, Ruth was committed to never leave Naomi.

When the two of them arrived back in Bethlehem in Judah, it was harvest time. In those days in Judah, they harvested as God directed them in scripture. This meant that they left enough in the field so that immigrants, the poor,

and widows could have some to eat.

Leviticus 19 describes the gracious way the harvest was to be done.

*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 not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.*

God had instructed them not to cut the corners of the fields of grain so that the immigrants and the poor might come to get what they needed.

They also left the gleanings. Gleanings were the tufts of grain that were cut but dropped on the first run through the field by the harvesters. The workers in the fields were instructed not to go back to pick these up, but to leave them for the poor, and immigrants.

God helped them establish this system of justice so that those who had more could provide for those who had less and that all might have enough.

So when Ruth came into Bethlehem around harvest time without any food, she did what others in her situation did. She

went to the fields and walked behind the harvesters to pick up the gleanings, and to pick what was left in the corners of the field.

The particular field Ruth found was owned by a man named Boaz, who saw Ruth and asked about her. He discovered her whole story, and approached her with great kindness.

### **READ RUTH 2:15-19**

Ruth and Naomi survived on the generosity of Boaz, whose heart was like God's heart. He was watching out for and providing a place for those on the margins of society who were in need.

To quickly complete the story, Boaz and Ruth got together and they had children and this mixed-race couple became part of Jesus' ancestry.

This congregation has a strong history of standing for justice like Boaz.

One example began in 1977, when a group of residents of Birmingham realized the need for low income housing in the city. This congregation along with four others in Birmingham joined together taking a stand for affordable housing to provide a space for economic diversity here.

However, there were some in the community who didn't want low income housing and fought the effort. This clash escalated and was watched by a national audience where Birmingham became labeled as a racist community.

One of our church members, Norma Moore, Scott Moore's mother, was interviewed about the situation on the 60 Minutes TV show, where she was able to frame the topic in such a way as to change the way Birmingham was understood by the whole country.

Norma and others from this congregation continued to work diligently with people from other churches in the community through stiff legal battles that went all the way to the United States Supreme Court.

The result was that Baldwin House, an apartment complex opened in 1994 a couple of blocks from this church building. Baldwin House continues to designate a percentage of its rooms for low-income housing.

Interestingly, I have heard that there are even people who strongly opposed the construction of Baldwin House in the beginning who then either became residents

there or strong supporters of Baldwin House.

It is interesting how over time they found their way to align with a "God-shaped" justice system in Birmingham.

The story of Baldwin House is this congregation's story. People from this congregation took an early stand for justice for lower income people when it faced staunch resistance. They made sure that there was a place for a financially diverse population in this community — that these people no longer had to survive on the margins, but in the very center of the community.

Norma passed away a handful of years ago, but her legacy lives on in us as a demonstration of this congregation's spirit.

This is a congregation that stands for diversity.

This is a congregation that makes room for all people to have a place they can call home.

This is a congregation that works for justice for those who have been marginalized and are in need.

This is a congregation that doesn't cut the corners!