

**Gifts to Each Other
The Book of Ruth
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Story: Part I

In seminary, the professors taught us how to build a congregation. We were promised that if we followed their strategies for inviting newcomers to worship, evangelizing the lost, discipling new believers and creating strong bonds between long term members and those being added to the flock, we would build ever-expanding congregations made up of people committed to one another for life.

My experience, however, has been that our society, for better or worse, is too fluid to expect congregations to stay together for life. People come and people go. Our children grow up and move away. Some stay in town, but drop out of church. Young couples cultivate their faith here and then buy starter homes in less expensive communities and get involved with churches in their new neighborhoods. Some people reach out to the church in times of crisis and then move on when the crisis resolves. Families commit heavily to the ministry of the church when their children are growing up and then, when the kids are gone, do other things with their time. Work schedules change and pull people away from worship. Marriages split up and one or both partners feel uncomfortable worshipping here in the wake of their divorce. Older members move to retirement communities or nearer their children and worship where they live.

Rather than see the church as something stationary that can be built, I now see it more like a caravan that can be accompanied. God leads his dear children along through life. We travel together for as long as we can. From time to time we come upon a bruised and wounded soul who needs our help and we stop, pick up the injured and nurse him or her back to health. Sometimes the renewed person travels with us and picks up others who are broken along the path, other times, they heal and take off in new directions.

Along the way, we come across other caravans, diminished by time and attrition and they join with us and we walk together for awhile. On occasion, we pass a caravan that has more children, a larger number of single adults, a different kind of music, better storytellers, nicer wagons and a few of our number split off to join them.

People come and people go. Some folks make deep and abiding friendships as they journey together in the caravan and they stay. A few decide that they never want to travel with any other band of people. They remain until they die at which point we stop, grieve together and send our beloved companion on to God. Then, with one less pilgrim, we continue on our journey.

Every person that comes and every person that goes is a gift and the caravan is a gift to all. For it can get pretty lonely when one tries to walk these roads alone. There is danger out there for isolated souls. We all need one another to make it through this world. We are indeed all gifts to one another along the journey of life.

Today we are going to look at a story that in some way affirms the "church as caravan" image that I have just described. The story begins, where all the best stories in the Bible begin, in Bethlehem. Unfortunately, as our story unfolds, we find the people of Bethlehem suffering from famine. One family, Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons, hear that food is more plentiful in the land of Moab, so they embark on a pilgrimage to a new land.

Once there, their little caravan is diminished by one when Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi alone with her two sons. Their situation improves slightly when the boys marry Moabite women and put roots down in the new country. Tragically, however, Naomi's sons die young, leaving her in a foreign land with two daughter-in-laws of a nationality other than her own. Naomi assesses her situation and decides to release her daughter-in-laws from their familial responsibilities to her and allow them to

seek new husbands from their own community. She further decides to return to her own people in Bethlehem and live out the remainder of her sorrowful days alone.

One daughter-in-law agrees to say good-bye and make her life in Moab. She expresses profound appreciation for the time she has traveled with Naomi, but concludes that she must go in search of other companions for the remainder of her journey. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth, however, refuses to leave Naomi. Against the old woman's protests, Ruth insists on journeying back to Bethlehem with Naomi to take care of her for the rest of her life. Her covenant to Naomi is captured in some of the most famous words in the Old Testament. I invite you to read them together as this morning's call to worship.

Story: Part II

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they faced a severe challenge of survival. Naomi had no husband or sons and therefore, no source of income. The only possible financial resource Naomi had was a relative of her dead husband by the name of Boaz. Boaz was a wealthy man and owned several fields. When Ruth heard about him, she asked Naomi to grant her permission to go Boaz's field and glean behind the harvesters.

Since gleaning is not a practice many of us are familiar with, I've placed this picture, loaned to me from what was the Gleaner's Sunday School classroom, to illustrate the process. In Ruth's day, paid field hands walked through the fields of corn or wheat and gathered the crop for the owner. Sometimes due to neglect and sometimes due to obedience to the law, the reapers left some good grain behind as they moved through the field. Poor people followed behind the field hands therefore, and scooped up the grain left behind. This act of retrieving the leftover grain was called gleaning.

Ruth turned her hand to gleaning to feed Naomi and herself. While she was at work, Boaz passed by and took notice of the unfamiliar woman in his field. In response to his inquiry, his servants told him about Ruth and all that she had done for Naomi. Moved by her compassion and service to Naomi, Boaz called Ruth to his side. We pick up the story in Ruth, chapter two, verse 8.

I don't know if their insurance is any good, but I like the Liberty Mutual commercial that begins with a woman pulling an inattentive man back from a busy street. That man goes on to help a young mother and child off a bus. In turn, the young mother walks by two teenage neighbors playing one on one and blocks an errant basketball from going into the street. Later, one of the young men finds some money in a commercial dryer and returns it to the owner who goes down the street and puts some money in an expired meter for a man who has parked there, only to discover he is out of quarters.

We see a similar pattern in this story. Ruth gives Naomi a wonderful gift of companionship and love. Her act of kindness inspires Boaz who goes out of his way to help a stranger from another land.

All of us have been the recipients of great acts of kindness in our times of need and now it is our turn to pass such kindness on to others. First, we will continue the chain of graciousness by praying for others. Then, when the prayer is concluded, we will take our benevolent offering. This offering is dedicated in its entirety to the needs of people in our church and community. Those needs are becoming more severe. The numbers of gleaners in the field grows day by day. Let us pray for one another and then give, as Boaz gave, to help those in need.

Story: Part III

I still remember how I felt when I first met Karen. I didn't ask her to marry me, but I did tell her I liked her and she said she liked me back. On my way to the airport after exchanging this information, I was so excited I told my cab driver all about Karen. He responded to each of my enthusiastic exclamations with a disinterested "Uh huh," but I kept babbling on.

After her encounter with Boaz, Ruth fairly floated on air back home to tell Naomi of the wealthy man's generosity. She returned with sacks full of grain and Boaz's assurance that she could always find nourishment in his fields. Although I can't prove it, I also think she told Naomi, "And I think he likes me."

When Naomi hears of the personal interest Boaz took in Ruth, she recognizes a gift she can offer to Ruth for all her service and support. We read her sentiment in chapter three, verse one.

The hymn we just sang, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" is a hymn about people walking the road of life together. "Oh, how sweet to walk, in this pilgrim way, leaning on th everlasting arms." When I hear these words, I am reminded of the prayer of St Teresa of Avila, quoted by Mother Theresa on numerous occasions. "Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world."

The everlasting arms of God often enter the world through our own. Presbyterian pastor M. Craig Barnes writes that God is always present, but usually not apparent. As we walk alongside each other through this life, we provide arms to lean upon and make the present God, apparent. I do this for you and you do it for me. As odd as it sounds, when we lean on each other, we discover that the everlasting arms of God are bearing us all through this life.

One of the ways we seek one another's security, as Naomi did for Ruth, is to help incarnate the everlasting arms of God for one another and this world. We do this every time we pass the peace, shake a hand, dry a tear or embrace one another in love. We do this every time we give out food in the pantry, visit a homebound member, teach a child in Sunday School, take a meal to a grieving family, listen to a teenager in crisis, take a friend to a doctor's appointment or send money to a missionary dedicated to bringing both earthly and living water to the people of Thailand.

All of these manifestations of the everlasting arms of God are supported by our tithes and offerings. In the spirit of Naomi, let us seek one another's security and give generously to the offering that supports us all.

Story: Part IV

This is the point where the story gets a little PG13. Naomi's gift to Ruth is to do a little matchmaking between Ruth and Boaz. Naomi tells Ruth, "Tonight Boaz will thresh barley on the winnowing floor outside the barn. After he works all evening, he will be hungry, thirsty and tired. He will eat and drink right there on the winnowing floor and then, because there is always a nice breeze there, he will sleep under the stars. Here's what you do Ruth. Clean yourself up, make yourself look nice, splash on some of that lilac water we keep around for special occasions and slip on down to the winnowing floor. Wait until Boaz has had his fill of food and drink and falls asleep, then steal in there beside him, uncover his feet and snuggle up. He'll tell you what to do from that point." Some of you are actually blushing right now.

Ruth does exactly as she is instructed and when she scoots in beside him, Boaz awakens. The Bible tells us what happens next in chapter three, verse eight.

Evidently Boaz had a little age on him and was thrilled to discover that a young, beautiful, smart, kind, loyal woman like Ruth would be interested in marrying him. When he wakes to find Ruth beside him he says, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich."

Let's recap. Ruth gave the gift of herself to Naomi. Boaz was inspired by that gift to provide food and protection for Ruth and Naomi. Naomi was inspired both by Ruth's service and Boaz's kindness to use her influence to bring Ruth and Boaz together, romantically. Finally Boaz is touched deeply by Ruth's gift of her love to him.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's great American novel **The Great Gatsby**, a woman named Myrtle Wilson is hit by a car and killed. When her husband George sees her corpse, he becomes inconsolable and a neighbor comes to sit with him. Seeking some other resource to help the grieving man, the neighbor asks: "Have you got a church you go to sometimes George? Maybe even if you haven't been there for a long time? Maybe I could call up the church and get a priest to come over and he could talk to you see?"

George replies, "Don't belong to any."

The neighbor doesn't give up. He continues, "You ought to have a church, George, for times like this. You must have gone to church once. Didn't you get married in a church? Listen, George, listen to me. Didn't you get married in a church?"

George sadly dismisses the question with, "That was a long time ago."

People in caravans only get through life by helping one another. I can't imagine how folks get through their most difficult days without a church to accompany them. The forces of life are too uncertain and potentially destructive to get through life alone. Together, we can face famine, death, immigration challenges, age, sickness, disappointment, you name it. When we serve one another, we create bonds of love that bind us together through every storm of life. Let us sing about serving one another.

Story: Part V

This story has a happy ending. After clearing up a few legal technicalities, Boaz and Ruth marry and eventually have a baby. The baby turns out to be a great blessing not only to Ruth and Boaz, but to Naomi in her senior years. Due to simple acts of kindness, everyone in the story has turned out to be a blessing to one another.

The last Wednesday in August, two of Mark and Vicki's friends spoke at our Bible study. The man was a Catholic deacon and his wife, a very active layperson. Both adults had worked extensively with Mother Theresa and told us of their experiences with her. Before they described what it was like to work with one of the greatest saints of our generation, however, we shared our prayer requests. Laonce needed help to get into college. A scholarship he had been counting on was retracted and he was in a jam. Terry had a blood clot that needed the Lord's attention. Maimo turned 99 and we celebrated her amazing life and also spoke of our concern for her son Mike. Nan Allison was struggling with some undefined health problems and she spoke of that. As we do every week, we celebrated some blessings, mourned some losses, circled our lives together and prayed.

When we finished, Mark shared a few words and then turned the session over to his guest. For a brief time, the man struggled to speak because he had been so moved by our prayers for one another. He said, "do you know how rare this experience is. This is church. This is being the body of Christ to one another."

As he commended us, I thought back to earlier this year when my mother-in-law, a devout disciple of Christ, came to prayer meeting. When I returned home later that night, she tried to speak of what the prayer requests and prayers of the people had meant to her. As tears fell from her eyes she said "what a gift that service is for those who attend."

What a gift indeed. Ruth's story ends with an amazing Scripture. One whose meaning we miss, if we are not tuned in. At the conclusion of chapter four, verse seventeen, we read about Ruth and Boaz's boy. The narrator writes, "They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David."

This marvelous story draws to a close by reminding us that this child, born out of the great gifts Ruth, Naomi and Boaz gave to one another, was the forerunner to none other than King David, the ancestor of Jesus the Christ. A powerful message resides in these dry words for all Christians. By being gifts to one another, we bring the gift of Jesus into this world.

Let us sing of this miracle together.