

**To Glean or Not to Glean. That is the Question**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Ruth 1:15-19b**  
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Today, we'll explore the story of Ruth.

A little background to get us started. In the time of our story, land is the most valuable commodity for the people of YHWH. Land was intended to remain among kinspeople from generation to generation. And in those days, land passed from father to son. Women were not allowed to own property. If there were no sons, then land went to brothers, or nephews, or cousins. Land, in theory, was not to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Such a system ensured cohesion – it meant political, social, economic, and religious stability, because it prevented outside influence.

There was also an exclusivity to this ancient cult that extended beyond the acquisition of land. We touched on this last week in Joshua. Many of our stories, Ruth included, came into their final form several centuries after their origin. These stories reflect the nationalistic attitudes that were prevalent in King Josiah's reforms in the Seventh Century BCE. We also see their strands in the Fifth Century writings of Ezra and Nehemiah. When Israel returns from exile, and seeks to rebuild its religion, its leaders strictly forbid mixed marriages. The covenant is for Israelites, not Canaanites, or Moabites, or any other Ites.

Willie Nelson once warned mamas not to let their babies grow up to be cowboys. Had he lived back then, he may have written: "Mama's don't let your babies grow up to marry Moabite women." Because foreign women bring foreign ways, and foreign Gods, and sooner than later, they'll turn your sons away from covenant living.

You wanna be a covenant people? Buy local. Marry local. Stay local. Preserve Israel before it's too late!

This all sounds so good in a vacuum.

Then there's a famine. And Elimelech and his wife Naomi, and their two young sons go to Moab where there is food. And they are happy there. And their sons grow, and they marry Moabite women. And somehow, somehow this family, despite the misgivings of later writers, lives as covenant people. They love God and neighbor.

And then one day, a triple-tragedy. Elimelech dies. And both of his sons, too. And there are no grandsons as of yet. And there are no next of kin in this foreign land. And Naomi, whose name means pleasant, is no longer full. She's empty. "Call me Mara," she says, which means bitter.

And the story exposes a significant flaw in the laws meant to protect covenant people. Back then, there was something called levirate marriage. A brother was obligated to marry his brother's widow to ensure her wellbeing and property.

But there were no more brothers. And there were no sons of age. And that meant Naomi, and her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth were left without a future, and really, even a present. They were completely vulnerable, and at the mercy of others' generosity.

Naomi says, “I’m going back to Bethlehem. It’s my only option. But you two are young. Stay here. Find new husbands who can provide for you. I want you to have a life of fulfillment.”

Orpah doesn’t want to go, but she knows Naomi is right. And she bids a tearful goodbye. But not Ruth. “I made a promise,” Ruth says. “You and me, we’re connected. Where you go, I go. Your people, and your God, are mine, too.”

But it’s not just that. Ruth isn’t just loyal. She also wants to help make Naomi feel whole again. Ruth is assertive. She determines to glean the fields to ensure the two of them can at least make it through the coming season. Ruth is strong when she knows Naomi isn’t ready to be, or can’t be in her grief.

And Ruth doesn’t just glean. She G-L-E-A-N-S. She comes early. She stays late. She works hard. She takes this task with the utmost seriousness. And when she has her share of wheat, she offers it first to Naomi, and then takes what’s left over. Did you catch that? Ruth gleans from what’s already been gleaned.

Now, those who are more cynical, may infer that Ruth’s a looker – maybe she’s a knockout, or the girl-next-door type, or she has the deepest blue eyes, and long legs, and even longer lashes that help her catch the attention of Boaz, the landowner whose field she gleans in. And maybe she is. But I think there’s something deeper. I think Ruth has a spirit that is palpable. How could you not notice somebody who stays loyal to her grieving mother-in-law, even when it’s to her severe detriment? How could you not notice someone who works with a sense of enthusiasm and intensity doing a chore that is so taxing, and a chore that exposes her vulnerability in such a public way? She’s forced to spend all day picking up scraps, just to survive. And yet her spirit is SO full. I think Boaz takes notice of Ruth, because he sees her remarkable presence. And he values what it means to be a good person.

Eventually, Naomi realizes that Ruth, in Boaz, has an opportunity to find security. She hatches a plan to help Ruth seduce Boaz, and convince him, as her kinsman, to marry Ruth and secure a life for her in Bethlehem. Boaz agrees, but only after first ensuring that both his integrity and Ruth’s integrity are intact. Upon verifying his claim, Boaz purchases Elimelech’s lands and marries Ruth. And together, they bear a son, Obed. We’re told that Naomi nurses the child, who eventually becomes the grandfather of King David. And Naomi, the one who was bitter, is pleasant once more. And she has a daughter-in-law worth seven sons.

Ruth’s is not a story without flaws. But don’t let your disdain for its flaws prevent you from also seeing its lasting goodness and value.

What’s good about this story?

This is a story about being good to the people in your lives. I think it’s a story about being a good neighbor. In a time when people demonized Moabites as “less than,” Ruth offers a glimpse of what it means to be good and true. She shows the people of Israel that foreigners are equally capable of being faithful to God’s covenant. In other words, love, and righteousness, and faithfulness, and empathy are not exclusive to race, or origin, or gender, or walk of life. And God’s got a place, a big, full, expansive place, for Jew and Gentile alike.

In Boaz, we find one who offers kindness. And we find one who does take seriously the traditions, laws, and customs of his faith. And in Naomi, we find one is able to assert power, and secure prosperity for her daughter-in-law by forcing a flawed system to work for her best interests.

And it's a happy ending. Loyalty, hard work, and kindness are rewarded with longevity, prosperity and generosity.

But our story is not without its problems.

Ruth and Naomi live in a system where they are still dependent on men. This time it turned out okay – I guess... The women now have economic security. Though I'd wager they still have a limited voice in matters extending beyond Boaz' household. And that assumes that Boaz is as gentle and kind in private as he is in public.

But what of the women in this system who weren't afforded the same kindness and dignity offered to Ruth and Naomi. What of the ones still gleaning, still wandering, still searching for security, all because they have no male next of kin? Or what of the ones forced to choose between an abusive householder and no security at all?

And Boaz is rightly commended for his generosity. But wouldn't you like to see him do more? Wouldn't you like for him to be a change agent? Wouldn't it be great if Boaz worked hard to use his privilege and his power to help transform the world into a place where people were less dependent on people like him? And instead, women like Ruth and Naomi, women with value, and skill, and decency, were empowered to be their own agents of change, doing more than just pulling the strings of a broken system?

And Ruth is always referred to as Ruth the Moabite, as if her ethnicity is the marker of her value, or lack of value. It's similar to the story of the Good Samaritan. Why must we call him that? He was a good neighbor, regardless of his origin. The story of Ruth is a potent reminder of our need to use labels to puff up, and to protect our privileges. And in the end, it's not the Moabite who is connected to the king. It is her native mother-in-law who is remembered in the genealogy. Is this a story about Ruth, or is it a story about Naomi?

To be sure, there is much to glean in Ruth, both good and bad.

And I think the question for us today, as we reflect on the idea of covenant living is this: Do we want to be a people who makes the practice of gleaning possible, or do we want to be a people who creates a world where the practice of gleaning is no longer necessary?

Let me put it this way. Each of us at Sardis has a personal harvest. And in its wake, we leave our excess for neighbors to glean: spare change to buy medications; spare canned goods to stock the food bank; checks to help supplement affordable housing; hashtags to voice our solidarity with people of color, and other marginalized communities.

Our generosity allows people like Ruth and Naomi to do okay – they may not thrive, but hey, we're helping them get by, right? And we've told them that God loves them. So, we've done our part.

But Sardis Baptist Church, we cannot be a covenant people, if our covenant is merely a lifeless and apathetic adherence to our traditions. If tithing is transactional; if the scriptures are but stilled and inflexible statutes; if voice is without action; if privilege and status quo are more important than

transformation; if our learning curve for love, and empathy, and justice ever levels off, we cannot be covenant people.

Jesus told us, “Don’t be content in the covenant you have, nor the law you follow. Stretch its limits to find God, not hide Her. And create a kingdom that is now.” And when I imagine that kingdom, I don’t see a quarter of our school children hungry, or black and brown lives denied equal access to justice, or \$2,500 one-bed room rentals, or a wake of discarded “your-welcome” gifts from Charlotte’s prosperous families. And I don’t see a kingdom made solely possible by the whims and graces of Charlotte’s Boazes.

Instead, I envision a city where people are kind to one another. And help one another – not from below or above, but beside. And a city where our time is not devoted to creating or storing up our excess, but rather, in redistributing it, so that those who once gleaned now thrive. And a city where an increase in the numbers of voices heard is not a threat to the security of those who once clenched the megaphone with an iron grip. And I see a kingdom made whole, by the boundless grace and mercy of a loving God.

One day Ruth helps Boaz. The next, he helps her.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m gonna keep tithing. And I’m gonna keep reading. And I’ve still got a case of tuna fish for the food drive. But I wanna work, really work, for the day when gleaning is no longer necessary.

I hope you’ll join me in that pursuit.

Not as Israelites. Not as Moabites. Just neighbors. Together. Children of God. Thriving in God’s harvest.

May it be so. And may it be soon!

Amen.