

It's early in the morning, and the sun yawns, perhaps even stretches a bit, before finally peeking out over the horizon. As the top of this pink-orange disk begins to ascend into the sky, and reveal its first warm light, Ruth walks toward the field of Boaz.

Ruth has a lean figure; her feet and hands are calloused; her tunic is dusty, fringing at its edges, and worn at its elbows, and a hood conceals her flowing locks; a thread-bare satchel is slung over her shoulder. Still, Ruth's meager appearance betrays her inner strength – there's something regal, and full of purpose about this woman.

Dawn illumines the sheer magnitude of Boaz' estate. 1,000 acres stretch beyond Ruth's eyesight. And like all the other wealthy land owners, Boaz leaves the edges of the field to be gleaned. Imagine a square of land with a border a yard wide, with four equal lengths of a mile and a half. It would take the better part of a morning just to walk the edges of the field, even at a brisk pace. Now imagine combing that area, bent forward as you walk, gathering the unwanted clippings of the harvesters with only your hands. And this to say nothing of the relentless noon-day heat.

Imagine also, that you are unable to speak the language of this village; you are a refugee who's had to flee because of famine in your home country. Also, your husband, as well as your brother-in-law, and your father-in-law have all recently passed away. Your sister-in-law, also a dear friend for you, has chosen to find refuge somewhere else. And your mother-in-law, the one whom you followed to this strange place, is mired in a season of grief.

And at the end of the day, after gleaning this field, all you'll have to show for it is an aching back, and chafed hands, and swollen feet, and enough grain to feed you and your mother-in-law for the evening. And when the sun rises tomorrow, you'll have to do it all over again.

This a love story!

I think too often though, we think of the love part of today's text like it's a Rom-Com. Yes, Ruth does catch the eye of Boaz, a ninth-century version of Prince Charming (if you dream of marrying 80-year old farmers!), and her social status is eventually heightened to some degree. By the story's end she'll be able to do much more than simply subsist; she will be a provider, and Naomi's honor will be restored. Still, I think there's a larger discussion for our congregation to have about the Ruth story in the future – in many ways the story masks and extends a myriad of troubling systemic and patriarchal patterns rather than resolving them. We are in a season where we await Ruth's 29th great grandson, one who lived to reveal and reform such troubling patterns, and invites us to do the same. Stay tuned for the Christmas Eve homily!

But back to this idea of love story. This is a story of Ruth's love for Naomi. Ruth determined that she was going to provide for Naomi. She put her grief aside; she put her prospects aside; she put her happiness aside, because she sensed that if she didn't, her mother-in-law would never thrive, let alone subsist. But I also think that Ruth's understanding of love for family paralleled the Mosaic covenant's understanding of love for God and neighbor.

Somehow, somehow, Ruth found wholeness in Naomi's family. Maybe it was a once-in-a-generation kind of romance with her husband. Maybe it was a sense of constant welcome she found in the company of Naomi and Orpah and their extended family. Maybe in the worship of YHWH, she finally experienced a people committed to love bound in both God and community. Maybe it was all of these things. Regardless, Ruth determined that she was gonna love Naomi, remain loyal to her, and secure for her a future, even if that future meant the monotony, uncertainty, and achiness of gleaning fields. Ruth has the audacity to believe that her individual actions can have transformative results.

I think lovers glean. And in this season of Advent, I am noticing SO much gleaning.

Red kettles glean copper pennies. The bell-ringers will endure the cold again tomorrow, hoping to add a few more resources to the endless demands of poverty. But every penny matters. Every penny is an act of love.

Strong, brave, thick-skinned neighbors gather at abortion clinics, and border crossings, and voting booths to deflect a barrage of insults hurled at our society's most vulnerable neighbors by those who equate systemic oppression with moral superiority. The protectors will be back again tomorrow – if even one drop of hate has been deflected by their umbrella of love, it will have been worth it.

Warm thoughts. Cups of soup. Virtual hugs. Silly affirmations. A flower, or a piece of candy, or a balloon. How can such things even begin to dent the grief of this season, when such grief is as wide as the field of Boaz? We're mourning the loss of family members, and employment, and relationships, not to mention civility, and normality, and Christmas nostalgia. But every cup of chicken soup for the soul is one step closer to love's healing power.

So Sardis Baptist Church, in this Advent season, what are we willing to glean? What painstaking, tedious, barely-moving-the-needle kind of activities are we willing to endure to offer a little dose of love to our neighbors?

It seems to me, if we created a world where everyone loved and gleaned with Ruth's tenacity and audacity, we wouldn't need Boaz to rescue us. Instead, we'd already be attuned to, and enveloped in the presence of a God who provides for every neighbor. And we'd live with the assurance of that enough-ness. And one of these days, we might just prepare a world that would offer fitting welcome to the One who comes to be with us.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.