



GENEROUS HARVEST: PREACHING RUTH

Resources for Week One

ABOUT PREACHING RUTH

Part of the Generous Harvest resources, Preaching Ruth is a resource for preaching two sermons exploring generosity in the Book of Ruth over a Harvest octave. Resource materials offer a starting point for sermon preparation. Preachers will readily adapt, amend and develop the suggested themes with reference to the preaching culture of the local congregation. Although written for Harvest the material can readily be adapted for use in Ordinary Time throughout the year:

- A short introduction to generous discipleship in Ruth
- Background notes to the text, drawing on insights from the commentaries
- Sermon outlines, suggested content and structure for two sermons
- An abridged reading of the Book of Ruth

THE SERMON OUTLINES

The structure of the sermon outlines is traditional:

- An opening, illustrative story, best told 'live'; try to avoid a reading of the text.
- Insights into generous discipleship, exploring the Bible story through the lens of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. For each character a single theme is drawn out. However, Ruth's story and the background notes suggest additional themes preachers may wish to develop.
- Generous discipleship today: a 'call to action'.



THE CALL TO ACTION

The sermon invites a response to the preaching of God's word for this congregation, from this passage, today. Specifically the call to action is framed around three invitations in our worshipping communities:

1. To review our giving to our church, sustaining ministry and as a personal spiritual discipline.
2. To join the Parish Giving Scheme, the most effective and efficient way to give generously.
3. To consider leaving a legacy to our church, a gift of life for the life of our church.



The book of Ruth weaves together two stories, divine and human. Both are stories of contrast and conclusion. The first story is the arc of God's purpose for Israel. It begins in the chaotic time of the Judges (1:1; Judges 21:25) and with a contradiction: no bread in Bethlehem, the House of Bread.

The second human story is framed by money matters. Ruth is not about money and possessions but the lives of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are inevitably shaped by money. The poverty of two widows contrasts with Boaz, 'a man of wealth and standing' (2:1), making all the more remarkable Boaz' statement in 3:11, as the sermon notes indicate. Financial inheritance dictates the self-serving response of Naomi's closest relative (4:2-6).

The first, divine story comes to conclusion through the actions of a generous God who feeds his people (1:6) and gifts a child to Ruth (4:13). His presence is affirmed both in blessing (1:9; 2:4, 12, 20; 3:10; 4:14) and as the root of Naomi's hurt (1:13; 20-21). The second, human story comes to conclusion by God inspired generosity: the generous relationship of Ruth and Naomi; the generous giving of Boaz.

HOPE BORN OF GENEROSITY

All human life is here. The themes of famine, refugees, faith-challenging grief, poverty and vulnerability by gender are readily recognisable today. In different ways we each know something of scarcity and anxiety in a cost of living crisis and rising interest rates. In different ways we each know something of the challenge to generosity from what God has entrusted to us. Ruth is not a story of saints untouched by trouble. God's purpose is as hidden as it is real.

But Ruth is a story of hope. Out of Naomi's pain, Ruth's loving kindness and Boaz's generous integrity come healing and wholeness, home and happiness. From the faithfulness of today is born a legacy for tomorrow. A King is gifted to God's people (4:17); a blessing to Israel and, in Jesus, to the world. [1]

HARVEST OF ABUNDANCE

We read Ruth at Harvest-tide, as Jewish tradition does, for the story is set at the start of the barley harvest (1:22).[2] Harvest frames the laws of gleaning (chapter 2) and was the time to bring First Fruits and Tithe (not specifically mentioned) to provide for poor and priest. The 'kinsman-redeemer' ensures that land and lineage are not lost. With other laws it ensures poverty is not generational. [3]

[1] *The Bible does not duck the ambiguity: Kingship is blessing but also burden (1 Kings 12)*

[2] *Ruth is one of the five Megilloth or 'small scrolls' in the Hebrew Bible, along with Esther, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations. The barley harvest usually begins around the time of Passover, so Jewish tradition has interpreted Naomi and Ruth arriving in Bethlehem (1:22) as Passover is held and the story ending with the Pentecost harvest celebration, once the barley and wheat harvests are completed (2:23). Reading Ruth between these two festivals recalls the Exodus journey through desert times to fulfilment of God's covenant promises (Deut. 16:9-12).*

LIVING THE LIFE OF FAITH

The Book of Ruth is just 85 verses long. Some 54 of those verses are people speaking to each other. God does not speak and in only two verses does God act (1:6; 4:13). But God is not silent. God speaks through Naomi. Broken by loss, unafraid to name and blame God for the bitterness of life (1:20-21) Naomi blesses others by the God who has turned his hand against her (1:8; 2:20). God speaks through Boaz who takes his faith to work (2:4) and extends growing generosity to Ruth in the gleaning fields, at the threshing floor and at the city gates. God speaks in Ruth's extraordinary kindness to Naomi and in the bold agency of her gleaning and marriage proposal, despite constraints of poverty, gender and outsider status. God speaks and works his purpose in and through faithful discipleship.

[3] *Ruth and Naomi are sustained by generosity. The gleaning and tithing laws sat alongside laws that forbade interest, regulated debt collection, cancelled debts, released economic slaves, proclaimed Jubilee. These laws were given to redeem and restore the gift of a promised land to all of God people, not only the wealthy.*

GENEROUS DISCIPLESHIP

Every day our lives bump up against the realities of money and possessions, for good and ill. So it's no surprise that Ruth offers much to learn about generous discipleship.[1] We are challenged to give generously from Boaz. We are challenged to live generously by Naomi and Ruth. Generosity is certainly about money. But if it is only ever about money generosity risks becoming transactional. We give to make a difference, to change a situation, to support our church. These things matter; very much so. But the generous discipleship of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, in their different ways, is transformational. For generous giving is rooted in generous character. Generosity is who we are, not just what we give. *'If I give all I possess to the poor ... but do not have love, I gain nothing' (1 Cor 13:3)*. More than that, generosity is the very heart of God who gifted a promise to Israel and gives us all things in Christ.

KEY THEMES IN RUTH

Ruth is often said to be a love story between Ruth and Boaz. Perhaps. But that's not the heart of the story. An overly romantic reading misses some key themes.

- **Naomi is important.** The loss of her 'two lads' (1:5) the 'lad' Obed (4:16) frames the story. Her bitter loss is the focus of chapter 1. Her prayer (1:9) becomes action in 3:1-5.
- **This is a story of two women.** Naomi, Ruth (and Orpah) act decisively, make choices, take initiative. Ruth 'clings' to Naomi in 1:14 (use do marriage in Gen 2:4) and loves Naomi (4:15).
- **Ruth's love is expressed by the rich biblical word hesed** (1:8; 2:20; 3:20). "This is a covenant term, wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty; in short acts of devotion and loving kindness arising from the heart that go beyond the requirements of duty or law." [2] Hesed is what God shows to Israel and expects of his people. It is shown by an impoverished Moabite widow.
- **This is a story of a community.** The towns-women welcome Naomi home, celebrate Obed's birth, name the child. The men praise Ruth and Boaz at the city gates. Boaz is Naomi's kinsman-redeemer (gō'ēl). He has responsibility for the economic (Lev. 25:25-30 & 47-55) and judicial well-being of clan members (Num. 35:9-27). Harvest is a shared celebration; a node in a network of laws seeking to restore the gift of God to the whole community.



[1] *'Even when the literature has other agendas, biblical faith cannot and does not avoid the defining power of economics for all life'*. Walter Brueggemann: *Money and Possessions in the Bible* page 164.

[2] *Ruth: Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* (2015), Zondervan p. 50.

Week One:

Sermon Outline for Ruth

FIRST READING:

Ruth 1:1-11; 14-22; 2:1-3; 8-16; 19-20

SECOND READING

Philippians 4:14-20 (or Phil 4:10-20)

GOSPEL READING

Luke 21:1-4



A POSSIBLE SERMON OUTLINE

The following sermon outline is offered as a starting point for preachers:

1. An opening story by way of illustration: Mr Miller and three Marbles
2. Naomi: receiving from a generous God
3. Ruth: discipleship choices on the journey
4. Boaz: growing in generous giving
5. Generous discipleship today: our journey of generosity

1. MR MILLER AND THREE MARBLES

The story of Mr Miller and the Marbles is best told in summary form to be shorter and sharper. Mr Miller, a grocer, gave more than food to three hungry boys. He gave respect, dignity and hope. Generosity of hand and heart transformed lives. He lived his ordinary life in an extraordinary way. As Christians we are invited to a generous discipleship, receiving all we have from God with gladness and gratitude and sharing with grace-filled generosity.

SETTING THE SCENE: A GENEROUS GOD

The book of Ruth is about real people, real saints in real situations. The big themes of hunger, famine, migration are instantly recognisable: in Ukraine and Sudan; in a climate crisis; in a stumbling economy.

Ruth is also personal. Naomi feels the compound grief of losing her husband and children. With that loss comes poverty and vulnerability. We recognise those things today: grief, redundancy, divorce, money worries, a cost of living crisis, rising interest rates.

It's a contradiction of God's promises. Bethlehem means 'the House of Bread'. But there is no Bread. But Ruth is about hope. God's abundance breaks into a story of scarcity. Two things happen.

First, the Lord gave bread to his people (1:6). In the Bible bread is more than survival. It is God's gift and 'sharing bread' is a sign of fellowship, of joy, of Eucharist. Second, the women arrive in Bethlehem at Harvest time. Harvest was for the whole community. Together they worked and rested and ate and celebrated. Together they brought their 'first fruits' and their tithes.

- Looking up they said 'thank you' and remembered God gave them all they had.
- Looking out they shared with the poor and the priest. The three boys in Mr Miller's shop remind us that not everyone shares in Harvest abundance.

A generous God provides abundance in scarcity. What can Naomi, Ruth and Boaz teach us about how we live with both? What can they teach us about generous discipleship?

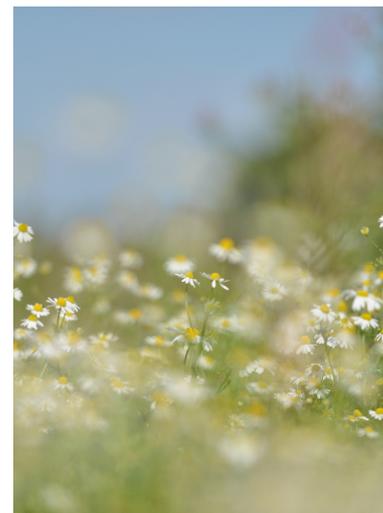
2. NAOMI: RECEIVING FROM A GENEROUS GOD

Naomi's story is about the gift of generous relationships. She is lonely in her grief, isolated from God in her loss. But Naomi is not alone. She has Orpah and Ruth. She has a community. Generous relationships will change Naomi's life; but not quickly. Grief takes time to heal. So will Naomi's bruised faith and anger at God. Grief cannot be rushed. Nor can it stand still.

Those generous relationships allow Naomi to be brutally honest about her shattered faith. In 1:8 God's hand is turned against her. She tells her old friends at Bethlehem, don't call me Naomi which means 'pleasant' or 'sweet'; call me Mara which means 'Bitter'. Naomi doesn't sugar coat her grief or anger.

But Ruth stays close. Ruth sees more than Naomi hollowed out by grief. She remembers and loves the older woman who shared love and life and loss with Ruth. Ruth sees more than Naomi's anger with God; Ruth sees the faith of Naomi in her God, despite her loss.

Look at 1:16: where you go, I go, where you stay, I stay. Not even death will separate her from Naomi. They are wonderful, moving words. But Naomi says nothing. No acknowledgement. No gratitude. Not even, 'well at least that's settled'.



- Naomi in her own words is empty. She's running on fumes. She has nothing to say, nothing to give. But on the tear stained road from Moab Naomi receives Ruth's love. Naomi receives Ruth's generous promise in 1:16. Naomi receives Ruth's help by gleaning for their food. A generous love, a generous relationship saves Naomi from locking people out, from self-absorbed grief.
- Because Naomi can receive the generous love of Ruth Naomi can be generous in her hopes for Ruth. In 1:8 Naomi prays that God will bless Orpah and Ruth for their loving kindness (hesed). That's not a small thing. Loving kindness is the word used in the Bible of God's special promise and faithfulness to Israel. That's how much Ruth loves Naomi. In 1:13 Naomi says, my life is too bitter for you to share. For all her loss, Naomi wants better things for Ruth. Naomi wants for Ruth everything God has taken from her.

Generosity is not only about the grace of giving; it is about the grace of receiving. Clenched fists can receive nothing, give nothing. [1] As Christians we are invited to begin a lifetime's journey into generosity. The first question is not, 'What should I give?' It is, 'What have I received?' Everything we have is God's gift to us: to receive and enjoy and to give and share generously (1 Tim 6:17-18).

[1] This theme can be developed with reference to Phil 4:15. Paul is grateful to the church for sharing with him in the matter of giving and receiving. In 2 Cor 8 before Paul speaks of what the Macedonian churches gave he speaks of the grace given to them.

3. RUTH: DISCIPLESHIP CHOICES ON THE JOURNEY

God blessed his people with food while Naomi was still in Moab (1:6). There is a promise of God. There's an invitation by God. What choice will the women make? To stay with what they know? To risk a long journey? To go back to a place Naomi left years ago and Orpah and Ruth had never seen? If generosity is a journey then Ruth shows us how to travel. God blessed his people in Judah with food but Naomi was still in Moab (1:6). To enjoy the promise of God meant choosing to leave what they know in Moab. They had to risk the road to Judah. They did not know what they might find in a place Orpah and Ruth had never been. The bible story captures the choices and challenges of the journey.

The word 'return' is used 12 times in chapter one. Naomi gets up to return from Moab in v6, she sets out from Moab to return to Judah in v7. Then Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to return Moab, but they insist they will return to Judah with her (v10). In v11 Naomi tells them to return home, twice. But Ruth's choice was Naomi. And Ruth's choice was Naomi's God.

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back (lit return) from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16) [1]

Ruth made choices on her journey. Our journey of generosity will also mean making choices. Naomi 'arose so that she might return' (1:6) and starting is often the hardest part of any journey. The women could go back to Moab. They could pause their journey. They might wonder if they were making the right decision. That's how it is on our journey into generosity. We must decide to start, face the choices and challenges along the way and we don't always know where God will lead us.

Ruth had Naomi, and Naomi's God. We never make our journey of generosity alone. Generosity is a grace God gives us (2 Cor 8:7). It's a journey we take as a church (Acts 2:42-46).

4. BOAZ: GROWING IN GENEROUS GIVING

Boaz shows us that we make our journey into generosity step by step. Boaz has money. He's 'a man of wealth and standing' (2:1). But generosity is not the privilege of the wealthy. The widow gave two small coins (Lk 21:14). She gave generously from what she had and she gave from a generous heart. [2]

On the morning shift Boaz finds people gleaning in his fields and that's OK. The Law requires Boaz to be generous in this way. He learns that Ruth is one of the gleaners and the whole town had heard about Ruth's overwhelming generosity to Naomi. Boaz' generosity goes above and beyond.

[1] Note the powerful observation of Phyllis Trible: 'Ruth stands alone; she possesses nothing. No God has called her; no deity has promised her blessing; no human being has come to her aid. She lives and chooses without a support group and she knows that the fruit of her decision may well be the emptiness of rejection, indeed of death. Consequently, not even Abraham's leap of faith surpasses the decision of Ruth's. ...And there is more. A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than the search for a husband. One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends on men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel. God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (1986)

[2] The widow's mite is not only about personal piety. Her giving is a prophetic challenge to injustice: Luke 20:45-21:4. For a different reading of this parable see Rev Peter Winn's online commentary, Urban Matthew.

- Boaz offers Ruth protection: staying only in Boaz' fields, close to his female workers (2:8).
- Ruth can drink from the jars of the workers instead of providing for herself (2:9)
- Ruth is invited to eat with Boaz' workers (2:14). It was bread, cheap wine, roasted barley. It's not a luxury but Ruth, 'ate, and was satisfied and had some left over' for Naomi (2:14; 18).
- In the afternoon shift, the heat of the day, Ruth can glean next to the workers bundling the stalks into sheaves (2:15) and they are told to leave some stalks for Ruth to pick up (2:16).
- (At the threshing floor in chapter three Boaz gifts Ruth six measures of barley – for Naomi.)

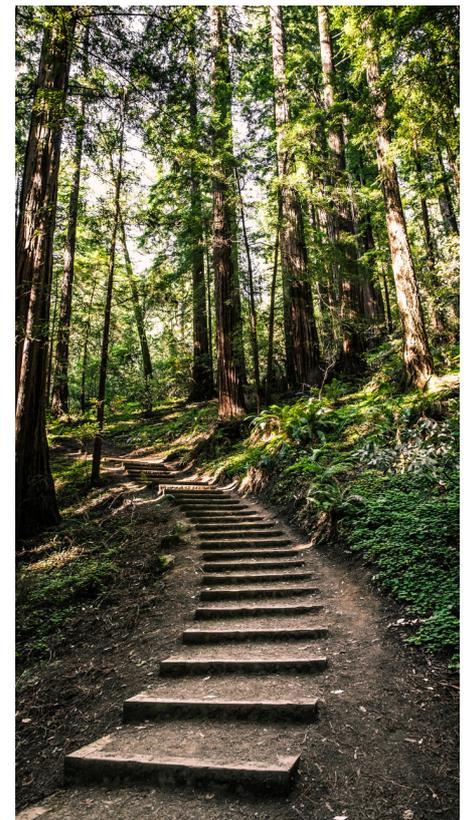
Here's the thing. Boaz grows step by step in his practice of generosity. Each act of generosity builds on the one before. Giving is not a one-time thing; it is not a static thing. Generous discipleship means making choices. St Paul invites the church at Corinth to, 'excel in the grace of giving' (2 Cor 8:7). We only get good at something when we practice.[1]

Gleaning is the generosity the law required. Boaz growing generosity to Ruth is what love requires. Boaz' own love for Ruth might come later. The love that sparks his generosity is Ruth's love for Naomi.

Boaz grows, step by step, in his practice of generosity. Each act of generosity builds on the one before. Generous giving is not a one-time thing. Generous discipleship means a lifetime of making choices. St Paul asked the church in Corinth to, 'excel in the grace of giving' (2 Cor 8:7). We get good by practice.[1]

Boaz' generous giving is now way beyond what the Law requires. His growing generosity is what love requires. Not Boaz' love for a woman he's just met. It's the loving kindness Ruth has shown to Naomi. Boaz has heard about Ruth's generosity to Naomi. In response, Boaz gives generously to Ruth. Generosity nurtures generosity. But Boaz' growing generosity is about more than food on Ruth's plate.

In 2:12. Boaz' prayer for Ruth is, 'May the Lord repay you, may you be richly rewarded'. For Boaz, generosity is not just food on the table, meeting needs. Boaz' generosity is God's blessing on Ruth. When we give generously to our church we don't just meet the needs of our ministry. Generosity is a blessing to others, a blessing to us and a blessing of praise to God.[2]



[1] To illustrate this point see the short story *'The 50p Giver'* at the diocese of Newcastle [stewardship pages](#).

[2] Paul's teaching about generosity lands here in 2 Cor 9. In giving to Jerusalem Corinth is blessed spiritually by God and God is blessed in praise and gratitude by Jerusalem and beyond because of the generous discipleship of the church at Corinth.



5. RUTH: DISCIPLESHIP CHOICES ON THE JOURNEY

Briefly then, what are the challenges to take away from the first part of this wonderful story?



NAOMI

In grief Naomi could receive the love shown to her and from that receiving Naomi could be generous in her hopes for Ruth. Generous giving starts with what has been given to us.

- Think about the generosity we have received from loved ones, from our church, from all that God has done for us in Jesus: Does our giving reflect what has been given to us?
- Think about the money and possessions God has given us. We may be Boaz. We may be the widow at the Temple treasury. Does our giving reflect what has been given to us?

RUTH

Generous discipleship means making choices. Ruth shows us what that looks like: *'where you go I go, where you stay, I stay'*.

- Have we made a commitment to live generously as part of our discipleship? A commitment not simply to give something but a commitment to generous giving?

BOAZ

Boaz grew, step by step, in his generosity, giving what love required.

- Where are we on our own journey of generosity? Have we made a start? What have been the milestones and the crossroads along the way? What stops us moving forward? Are we growing step by step in generous discipleship?
- Generous Harvest invites us to consider three steps on our journey into generosity:



Prayerfully to review our giving to sustain the mission and ministry of our church.



Practically to join the Parish Giving Scheme as the most effective way to give to our church and to help us give generously.



Personally to consider leaving a legacy; a gift of life to bless our church, today and tomorrow.

Week One: Background Notes

FIRST READING:

Ruth 1:1-11; 14-22; 2:1-3; 8-16; 19-20

SECOND READING

Philippians 4:14-20 (or Phil 4:10-20)

GOSPEL READING

Luke 21:1-4



The opening verses of chapter one sketch briefly the arc of the two stories mentioned in the introduction. The chaotic time of the Judges (Judges 21:25) sees famine in Israel, driving Naomi and Elimelech from their land (4:3) to Moab.[1] Their sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Bereavement and grief are allied with loss of economic security and social vulnerability.

A GENEROUS GOD

In 1:6, explicitly, the Lord gives bread to his people. 'Bread' in the OT is used of survival and necessity but also of God's blessings: the gift of manna (Exodus 16), of welcome, hospitality and fellowship. In 1:22, implicitly, Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem as the start of the barley harvest. Scarcity meets abundance; isolation meets community; despair meets hope.

Three practices attach to Harvest:

1. **First Fruits** (Lev 23:9-21; see also Dt 26:1-11) whilst the people keep Sabbath by doing no regular work and were together in a sacred assembly
2. **The Tithe** (Dt 14:22-29) to remind Israel that all they had was God's gift and to make provision for the poor and the Levite. (First Fruits and Tithe may be aspects of the same practice)
3. **Gleaning**: provision in the harvest fields for the poor and the foreigner among you (Lev 23:22).

NAOMI IS THE FOCUS

Ruth and Orpah's grief and childlessness pass without comment. In 1:3 Elimelech is, unusually, Naomi's husband (1:3). It's all about Naomi. She hears of food in Judah; she 'arises' that she might return (1:6) and she sets out for Judah (1:7); the phrase with her two daughters in law is subsidiary. The underlining is deliberate. Naomi's loss is expressed in three ways:

1. Naomi loses her name. Translations add 'Naomi' for clarity. In 1:5, the woman is left bereaved of husband and sons. In 1:5-7 Naomi is not named save as 'she'. [2]
2. The heartfelt incoherence of 1:11-13, the impossibility of her having more sons.
3. The word play on 'Naomi' (meaning 'pleasant' or 'sweet') in 1:20: Call me Mara ('bitter') because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.

[1] Moab is viewed negatively in Deut. 23:3-6 because of the events in Numbers 22-25.

[2] Phyllis Trible powerfully comments: 'From wife to widow, from mother to no-mother, this female is stripped of all identity. The security of husband and children, which a male dominated culture affords to women is hers no longer;...the blessings of old age... are there no longer'. (God and the Rhetoric of Human Sexuality; 1978)

THE AMBIGUITY OF FAITH

Naomi's life is bitter; God is named and blamed. He has turned his hand against (1:13), afflicted (literally 'testified against'), brought misfortune (1:21). Raw hurt is captured in the rhythm of 1:20-21:

*'Don't call me Naomi' she told them. 'Call me Mara,
because the **Almighty (Shaddai)** has made my life very bitter.
I went away FULL, but the Lord (Yahweh) has brought me back EMPTY.
Why call me Naomi? The Lord (Yahweh) has afflicted me;
the **Almighty (Shaddai)** has brought misfortune upon me.'*

Yet, Naomi prays a home and husband for Ruth and Orpah (1:8-9), the very gifts God has taken from her. The sermon outline notes the grace of receiving generosity as the fertile soil of giving.



RUTH'S CHOICE

The more literal translation of the King James Bible captures something not clear in modern translations. The verb 'return' is used 12 times in chapter one. Naomi 'arises to return from Moab' (1:6); the road 'returns them to Judah' (1:7). Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to 'return' to their 'mother's house' (again, unusual) (1:8) and again in 1:11 and 1:12. In 1:15-16 'return' is used twice. Beautifully, the anxious question of 'returning' is picked up in 4:15 where the child Obed will 'return life' to Naomi.

Orpah makes her choice and passes out of the story, without censure. But Ruth expresses her commitment, powerfully, in 1:16-17a. The sermon outlines explores this dynamic of choosing to travel or return with reference to generous discipleship and the insightful words of Phylis Triple on the significance of Ruth's choice.

HEALING GENEROSITY

In response to Ruth's promise, however, Naomi says nothing, no longer pressing Ruth to return to Moab. Verse 1:13b expresses Naomi's despair and the quiet work of gracious generosity that is the healing of our hurts. The verse could be translated in three ways:

1. my life is bitter because of you. (Naomi had no grand-children.)
2. life is more bitter for me than you.
3. my life is too bitter for you to share.

The first option clashes with 1:8. The second speaks to a self-absorbed grief, a hierarchy of grief: my loss is worse than yours. The third acknowledges the depth of loss but graciously wants better things for Ruth and Orpah. It picks up the earlier prayer of Naomi in 1:8) the happiness of rest, home and husband denied to her by God (1:8).

Ruth 2:1-3 moves the story forward: introducing Boaz and shifting the focus onto Ruth.

'WHOSE NAME WAS BOAZ'

Boaz is a relative of Naomi, the same clan as Elimelech but this is not the technical word *gō'el* or 'kinsman-redeemer'. Here the word anticipates a pivot from the loss of land (1:1-3) to redemption (4:1-9). The word *gō'el* appears later (2:20) after evidence of Boaz' generous favour to Ruth and indicates, perhaps, that generous character in the gleaning field is a promise of generosity at the city gates.

Boaz is 'a man mighty and wealthy' (*ish gabor hayil*; 2:1). Wealth (*hayil*: Gen 34:29; Dt 8:17-18) can also mean valour or strength. It may imply a compound meaning of 'wealth and character'. The real significance, however, is comparison with 3:10 where Ruth is 'a woman of substance' (*ishah hayil*). A translation as 'virtue' of 'noble character' loses the Boaz parallel. Ruth has no wealth but in wealth of character she is Boaz' equal. Generous giving and character are two sides of the same coin.



ENTER RUTH

In 2:1-3 the centre of gravity shifts to Ruth. She takes the initiative to glean; Naomi still almost silent speaks briefly (just two words in Hebrew): Go, my daughter. The harvest of 1:22 anticipated abundance. Hope now takes shape as a wealthy kinsman.

Gleaning is commanded in Lev 19:9-10 and Lev 23:22 'for the sake of the poor and the stranger'. The verb 'to gather' or 'to glean' is used nine times of gathering the gift of manna in Exodus 16. Men would reap the corn; women stacking the stalks into bundles for the threshing floor. Gleaners follow at a distance. 'It so happened' or 'by chance' Ruth the Moabite gleans in Boaz' field (2:3). God's purpose is indicated for Hebrew faith knew nothing of 'chance'.

BOAZ' JOURNEY OF GENEROSITY

The progression of Boaz' generosity to Ruth is indicated and explored in the sermon outline: protection, water, food at mealtime, access to the sheaves (2:8-9; 14-16). Why is Boaz so generous to Ruth? The answer is given in 2:11-12. It is important to understand the story of Ruth. It is also important for our understanding of stewardship.

Boaz is generous in facilitating gleaning in his fields. Doubtless the relationship between landowner, workers and gleaners could be strained. Gleaners in their need could get too close to the reapers and the passage suggests (2:9b) that women could be vulnerable. But Boaz' growing generosity to Ruth goes beyond what the Law required. It goes beyond the needs of the poor, beyond compassion for the poor, vital as these things are.

Now, the rich biblical word *hesed* is not used in 2:11-12 but is surely implied. Ruth's care for Naomi has already been called *hesed* (1:8) and in 3:10 Ruth's proposal of marriage is a *hesed* even greater than Ruth has already shown. (On *hesed* in 2:20 see the note below).

The point is that Boaz' generosity to Ruth is not because he loves Ruth but because Ruth loves Naomi. Ruth's overwhelming generosity to Naomi invites generosity from Boaz. Moreover, Ruth's *hesed* towards Naomi reflects the character of God Boaz prays for God's blessing on Ruth as one who shows *hesed*.

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

In 2:12 the blessing Boaz offers to Ruth uses explicitly financial terms. There is no contradiction between the life of the spirit and the material world.

- May God repay or recompense Ruth: the Hebrew is salam, an economic word meaning to be filled, completed (shalom is from the same root).
- May God 'richly reward' Ruth, literally, pay the full wages.

Note also that the barley which Ruth threshed and the surplus from the meal (2:17-18) stand as symbols of Boaz' generosity. The same happens in 3:15 where Ruth finds Boaz asleep by the heap of grain and he gifts Ruth a six full measure of grain as a token of his promise to marry. Money is more than financial transaction. It takes the temperature of our heart. It speaks of relationships. 'Where you treasure is there you heart is also' (Lk 12:34). We might say our giving has a sacramental character.

Something else is happening. In 2:1 Boaz was only named right at the end of the verse, a literary technique which is repeated in 2:19b. In 2:1 Boaz was revealed as a 'relative'. Now in 2:20 Boaz is revealed as 'kinsman-redeemer' ((gō'ēl)). Further, Boaz is 'our kinsman-redeemer'. Ruth is no longer a Moabite stranger but now shares Israel's blessings because she has shown the hesed of God.

GENEROSITY AND CHARACTER

The meaning 2:20 is a little unclear. First, it can be translated in two ways:

- 'whose hesed has not forsaken the living and the dead'
- 'who has not forsaken his hesed to the living and the dead'.

Second, the identity of the 'who' is not clear. It may be that God has not forsaken God's hesed and works through Boaz. It may mean that Boaz has not forsaken the hesed God requires of his people.

Regardless, Boaz' generosity in the gleaning fields is more than human compassion, however important. His generosity is an expression of God's loving kindness and a token of Boaz' character, who can be relied upon as 'kinsman-redeemer' when the time comes.



APPENDIX ONE: MR MILLER AND THE MARBLES 6 [1]

During the waning years of the depression in a small south-eastern Idaho community, I used to stop by Mr. Miller's roadside stand for farm-fresh produce as the season made it available. Food and money were still extremely scarce and bartering was used, extensively. One particular day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas. I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas. I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes. Pondering the peas, I couldn't help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller and the ragged boy next to me.

"Hello Barry, how are you today?"

H'lo, Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus' admirin' them peas ... sure look good."

"They are good, Barry. How's your Ma?"

"Fine. Gittin' stronger alla' time."

"Good. Anything I can help you with?"

"No, Sir. Jus' admirin' them peas."

"Would you like to take some home?"

"No, Sir. Got nuthin' to pay for 'em with."

"Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?"

"All I got's my prize marble here."

"Is that right? Let me see it."

"Here 'tis. She's a dandy."

"I can see that. Hmmm, only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home?"

"Not 'zackleybut, almost."

"Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble."

"Sure will. Thanks, Mr. Miller."

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said: "There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn't like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, perhaps."

Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had died. They were having his viewing that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them. Upon our arrival at the mortuary we fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort we could.

Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts ... very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing smiling and composed, by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her and moved on to the casket. Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one, each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary, awkwardly, wiping his eyes.

Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and mentioned the story she had told me about the marbles. Eyes glistening she took my hand and led me to the casket. "Those three young men, who just left, were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim "traded" them. Now, at last when Jim could not change his mind about colour or size ... they came to pay their debt. "We've never had a great deal of the wealth of this world," she confided, "but, right now, Jim would consider himself the richest man in Idaho." With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three, exquisitely shined, red marbles.

[1] This story, with minor text changes, is freely available on the web; attributed to WE Peterson Ensign Magazine 1975