“On My Own”

Preaching Text: Ruth 2:1–23
Accompanying Text: Luke 6:36–38

Gracious and Loving God,
Open our ears, O Lord to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today/now and always. May your words be proclaimed either through me or in spite of me. Amen

We have officially arrived at the season of graduation ceremonies. I believe Central Dauphin graduates on Tuesday evening (congratulations to all of you who are graduating). This means that, from now until somewhere around midsummer, there will likely be graduation parties every weekend. It is wonderful to celebrate graduation- it is a huge accomplishment! Over twelve years of struggle, challenge, learning and growing. Both my children have graduated high school, my youngest in 2024 and my oldest in 2021. I recall that my oldest did not want to walk for his graduation ceremony, but I made him because it wasn’t only about him getting to the finish line of high school, but also how all those late nights of he and I sitting at our dining room table doing those “opps I forgot” middle school science projects weren’t all for nothing, can you relate?

Recently, my Facebook memory feed had me reflecting on their graduation ceremonies and their subsequent parties, which ultimately led me down a rabbit hole to think about my own high school graduation. If I think hard about- I can recall having a mindset that many young people had at that age- I thought I could conquer the world- the world was mine to explore. I could be anyone or anything. Ms. Independent has nothing on me and as Patti Labelle once sang, I was going to do it “on my own.” I didn’t need anyone or anything- I could do it by my self.

If I am being honest in my reflection, I likely had that mindset in one form or another for several years- until I decided to become a foster parent at the age of 26. I’ll circle back to 26 year old me in a moment and talk more about that mindset shift, but first lets ponder on our scripture lesson for today from Ruth.

I imagine that the mindset I, as well as many high school graduates, had could have also easily been the mindset of Elimelech (EL LEE MEL ECH), Naomi's husband, as well as their two sons, Mahlon (MA H LON) and Chilion (KEY LEE ON) We learn in Ruth 1 that they leave their hometown of Bethlehem and move to the country of Moab. Using our holy imagination, we could easily think that these persons thought they could also be like Patti Labelle and do it "on my own."

Sadly, for Naomi and Ruth, tragedy strikes. We learn that they have returned to Bethlehem carrying grief. They experience unimaginable tragedy- Naomi has lost her husband and her sons. Ruth has lost her husband, her homeland, and the future she once imagined.

They enter into a season of life that we all experience one time or another- seasons in life where prayers seem unanswered. The future feels uncertain. The losses pile up faster than the blessings. We look around for signs of God's presence and find only ordinary days filled with ordinary and mundane struggles.

Both Naomi and Ruth had built up dreams in their heads about what their lives would be like, but sadly, for both of them, those dreams weren't their reality- if anything, it was the opposite. They arrived back in Naomi's hometown not as triumphant heroes but as vulnerable women living on the edge of survival.

They are poor.

They are dependent upon the kindness of strangers. It is in this place that we find them in our passage today and it is precisely in this place of uncertainty that God begins to work.

Not through a miracle.

Not through a prophet.

Not through a dramatic voice from heaven.

God works through people.

Our passage tells us that Ruth "happened" to come to the field of Boaz. On the surface it sounds like coincidence, doesn't it? But the author is inviting us to see something deeper. What appears to be a chance encounter may actually be grace undercover.

Ruth goes looking for grain so the story tells us.

It is here in our story where I believe God is already preparing a blessing.

Boaz arrives in the field and notices Ruth. He learns about her faithfulness to Naomi- If you recall, Naomi says, "where you go, I will go, etc." and immediately, Boaz responds with compassion. He offers protection. He offers dignity. He offers abundance.

And in doing so, he becomes the embodiment of God's *hesed*—God's steadfast, covenantal love. Lets unpack this word for a second. Hesed is a huge theme in the book of Ruth. Hesed (חֶסֶד) is a profound Hebrew word that describes a deep, enduring love and covenantal loyalty. It is more than a feeling; it is truly love in action. It is about going above and beyond someone's expectations to care for someone in need.

This is one of the great themes of Scripture: God's love often arrives wearing human faces. And in our story today, it is Boaz, but this can also be seen today in our daily lives through our communal life within the church:

When someone stands beside us in our grief, God is there.

When someone offers kindness to a stranger, God is there.

When someone chooses generosity over selfishness, God is there.

God's grace is often revealed not through supernatural interruption, and I would argue that is rarely the case, but instead it is through ordinary acts of grace and mercy.

Returning to my story from earlier, When I was 26, most people that age are interested in their careers, advancing on the corporate ladder, thinking about obtaining a master's degree. It is easy to think- I can make it on my own. What did I decide to do at 26? I decided to be a foster parent to two children

(of whom I would eventually adopt). It was the most challenging, yet rewarding experience of my life. It was through these experiences that I have come to relate more to and more understand the story of Ruth because it is through that experience that I learned about community. Because, as the saying goes, it truly takes a village to raise children. I couldn't do it without my church family. My family lived about an hour away from where I lived and I lived another hour away from where I worked. I had a church family that would pick up my kids from school when they were sick, I had a church family that picked up my kids from their choir practices, that helped me to teach them how to drive. There is truly power in community.

And that truth that I discovered as a foster parent is also the same truth we find in Ruth which powerfully connects with Jesus' teaching in Luke 6.

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Jesus does not merely call us to admire God's mercy. Instead, He calls us to embody it.

Mercy is not simply a feeling.

Mercy is action.

Mercy feeds the hungry.

Mercy welcomes the stranger.

Mercy protects the vulnerable.

Mercy sees people whom society overlooks.

That is exactly what Boaz does in Ruth 2. In a culture where Ruth's identity as a Moabite woman could have made her invisible, Boaz chooses to see her.

And that matters because our world still creates outsiders. There are still people who are told they do not belong.

Immigrants and refugees.

People experiencing poverty.

People of color facing systemic injustice.

People with disabilities.

LGBTQ people who have been excluded from communities that should have welcomed them.

Far too often, society decides who deserves dignity and who does not. And sadly, the church has sometimes participated in that exclusion.

But Ruth reminds us that God has a habit of showing up among those pushed to the margins. Ruth is a foreigner. A widow. An outsider. Yet she becomes the recipient of extraordinary grace.

The message is clear: God's love is not limited by the boundaries human beings create. (Repeat)

In fact, some of the most beautiful movements of God in Scripture happen when those boundaries are crossed. Boaz does not ask Ruth to become someone else before showing her kindness. He does not demand that she earn her worthiness. He simply recognizes her humanity.

What if the church did the same?

What if we became communities where every person was treated as beloved?

What if we measured faithfulness not by how effectively we exclude, but by how radically we include?

What if mercy became our first response instead of judgment?

That is the vision Jesus offers in Luke 6.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged."

"Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

"Give, and it will be given to you."

These are not merely individual spiritual practices. They are <u>instructions</u> for building a different kind of community—a community shaped by grace instead of fear.

There is a difference between going to church and being the church.

There is a difference between showing up and being present with someone.

There is a difference between thoughts and prayers and truly standing with someone in their grief.

Our faith is about being present. Here. Now.

Our faith is about being a community. We see that countless times in scripture. We see it in the story of Ruth. We see that today. It takes a community.

A community where generosity overflows.

A community where dignity is shared freely.

A community where everyone can find refuge beneath God's wings.

That image appears in Ruth 2 when Boaz blesses Ruth:

"May you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."

What a beautiful picture of God.

Not a God waiting to reject.

Not a God looking for reasons to condemn.

But a God who gathers people beneath wings of protection and love.

And perhaps that is the deepest lesson of this chapter.

Naomi begins the story trapped in bitterness and despair. She cannot yet see God at work. But by the end of the chapter, hope begins to return.

She recognizes that God has not abandoned them.

The blessing was there all along. The field was there. Boaz was there. The grain was there. The kindness was there. God was there.

Sometimes grace arrives so quietly that we almost miss it. It appears in a friend's phone call. In a meal shared during difficult times. In a word of encouragement. In an unexpected opportunity. In a community that says, "You belong."

The challenge of Ruth 2 is not only to recognize those moments of grace but to become them for others.

The world has enough judgment. The world has enough exclusion. The world has enough scarcity and fear.

What it desperately needs are people willing to embody God's *hesed*. People who notice the overlooked. People who share what they have. People who make room at the table.

People who believe that every human being bears the image of God and deserves dignity, compassion, and love.

For when we do that, we become like Boaz in the field.

We become answers to prayers we never heard spoken.

We become signs of hope in a weary world.

And through ordinary acts of mercy, the extraordinary love of God becomes visible once again.

May it be so. Thanks be to God. Amen.