

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 16, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Ruth 3

Theme: Ruth: Daring to Act

[prayer]

How do we know when it is time to wait on God and when it is time to act?

Discerning the will of God involves learning to balance the polarities of stillness and movement. Sometimes God will ask us to wait; other times God will invite us to act. It is our job to discern which posture God is calling us to in any given moment.

Proverbs 9:6 says, “Seek [the LORD’s] will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take” (NLT). And in our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us to “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt 7:7 NRSVue).

Seek, ask, search, knock. Scripture describes discerning the will of God as an *active* rather than a *passive* process. We don’t just wait for the will of God to descend upon us. Discernment involves reflective prayer in concert with action. The two go hand in hand; they inform one another.

Discerning the will of God involves cultivating a relationship with God, and relationships are not defined by a mathematical formula. Relationships are complex and messy. They involve giving and taking, sacrifice and risk. They involve courage, vulnerability, and learning to trust. Above all, they involve commitment. You cannot discern the will of God *for* your life if you are not committed to nourishing the voice of God *in* your life. You must learn active spiritual listening. You must train your spiritual ear with spiritual disciplines like regularly studying Scripture, daily prayer, communal worship, holy conversation with fellow believers, and silence and solitude.

There is no burning bush or pillar of cloud and fire in the Book of Ruth. God does not speak in this book – at least, not audibly. And yet, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz all demonstrate discernment. All three act with boldness and integrity in the face of uncertainty.

We ended chapter two with the note that Ruth “stayed with Boaz’s young women, gleaning until the completion of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law” (2:23 CEB). This sentence begs the question: What will Ruth and Naomi do when the harvest ends and there is no longer any food for them to glean? How will they survive?

Naomi reciprocates Ruth’s earlier initiative and decides to take the lead in securing their future. She is no longer bitter or disinterested. She embraces her responsibility toward Ruth and decides to boldly seek Ruth’s well-being. In the ancient near east security for women came primarily through marriage; Naomi must find Ruth a husband and Boaz is the obvious choice. God has already used Boaz to demonstrate his providence and faithfulness. And so, she instructs Ruth to bathe and put on her best clothes, and then she sends her out into the night to seek Boaz at the threshing floor.

The threshing floor is where the wheat and barley grain are separated from their chaff. It is also a place where men have been laboring hard and possibly drinking hard. In the Bible, the threshing floor is associated with illicit sexual activity. It is a risky place to send a young woman alone at night. Naomi instructs Ruth to keep herself hidden until Boaz has gone to sleep and then “go, uncover his feet, and lie down. And he will tell you what to do” (v. 4).

At this point in the story, most modern readers are wondering what the heck is going on! The Hebrew for “feet” can also mean “legs.” Feet are also sometimes used as a euphemism in the Bible for genitals. But the word can also just mean feet. There is no way to know for sure what is meant by the word in this passage.

But if we step back from the specific word and look at the overall scene, we can get a good sense of what is happening. Ruth tiptoes up to the sleeping Boaz, lies down beside him, and uncovers some part of his body. She positions herself at his feet, an expression of subservience. She spends the entire night there. There are definite sexual overtones to this passage. And while this may feel scandalous, it

also forces us to consider how throughout history poverty and lack of autonomy have often left women with no other option than to use their sexuality for survival. This is an old problem that still exists today. Rather than condemn women for such tactics, we should examine and dismantle the unjust socio-economic structures that force women into this plight.

Importantly, though, in this text there is no explicit mention of sexual relations. Instead, at some point, perhaps feeling a draft of cool air, Boaz wakes up, rolls over, and is genuinely shocked to find Ruth lying next to him. “Who are you?” he demands, as if to say: Woman, what are you doing next to me in the middle of the night?!

Naomi had instructed Ruth to wait for Boaz to tell her what to do, perhaps implying that Boaz might ask Ruth to have sex with him. But Ruth ignores Naomi’s instruction. Instead, she boldly tells Boaz what to do! When Boaz questions who she is and what she is doing, Ruth replies, “I’m Ruth your servant. Spread out your robe over your servant, because you are a redeemer” (v. 9).

To spread one’s robe or cloak over a woman is to marry her. In other words, Ruth proposes to Boaz! The word for robe, *kanaf*, also means wing. Recall that in the previous chapter Boaz blessed Ruth, saying “May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings (*kanaf*) you’ve come to seek refuge” (2:12). Ruth calls upon Boaz to fulfill his duty to her as a *goel*, a kinsman redeemer. She uses the very language that Boaz used in the previous chapter to bless her. She encourages him to take permanent responsibility as God’s agent for her protection and provision, to offer her shelter and refuge. Sometimes when we intercede in prayer for another person, we end up being God’s answer to that prayer.

Ruth is bold in asking for what she needs and Boaz responds with integrity. He does not take advantage of her but instead matches her faithfulness to Naomi with his own faithfulness. He promises to do for her what she asks: He will secure her future, whether by himself or by another male relative. To spare her the dangerous night journey back to Naomi, Boaz has Ruth remain with him until dawn and then sends her home with additional food.

We can take a leaf from both Naomi and Ruth's book. Our pursuit of God's will for our lives should be bold, too. We can be bold like Abraham and argue with God for the sake of others. We can be bold like Jacob and wrestle with God until He blesses us. We can be bold like David and pour out our hearts' emotions in lament and in praise, trusting that God listens to it all. We can be bold like the Syrophoenician woman begging for Jesus to heal her daughter, like Jairus begging for Jesus to heal his son, like the bleeding woman reaching for the hem of Jesus's robe, for Jesus's *kanaf*, desperately hoping the shadow of the Almighty will fall upon her and heal her.

Who taught us our prayers should always be quiet and mild mannered? Sometimes we are waiting on God to act when God is waiting on *us* to act, to take the first step toward redemption. *Seek, ask, search, knock...*and the door will be opened to you.

Before I conclude, I want to briefly address something critical in this chapter. Currently our culture is having a great debate about gender roles. What does it mean to be masculine? What does it mean to be feminine? And one of the messages I see propagated is an old one: Men act while women wait. Frequently I see this message paired with cherry-picked passages from Scripture about how women should submit to the leadership of men. The story of Ruth can absolutely be used to support traditional gender roles. Ruth knows that she is a woman in need of protection and Boaz knows he is a man who can provide that protection. But this isn't necessarily a God-ordained hierarchy. Ruth needs protection because she exists in a society where women are largely hamstrung from providing for themselves. But in this chapter, Ruth and Boaz actually reverse the traditional male-female hierarchy. Ruth does not wait. She acts...and Boaz submits to her.

The real biblical standard for male-female relationships is men and women mutually submitting to each other in love and faithfulness. For this is the way of Jesus, the God who submitted to death on a cross out of love and faithfulness toward us. Jesus exhorts us to "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33 NRSVue). Let that be your guiding compass and you will know when to wait...and when to act.

Amen.