

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Ruth 4

Theme: Ruth: New Life

[prayer]

Today we conclude our time studying the Book of Ruth and we pick up exactly where we left off last week. Boaz has promised Ruth that he will find someone to marry her. Recall that Ruth has already proposed marriage to Boaz. But Boaz is aware of another *goel* (kinsman redeemer), someone who is a closer relative than Boaz and therefore has the first right of refusal. Boaz goes to the city gate, where men would gather to negotiate business and legal affairs. He waits for the unnamed man to walk by and when he does, Boaz invites him to sit down. He then gathers ten of the town elders to witness the proceeding.

Boaz explains to the nameless kinsman that Naomi is selling Elimelech's land. A widow did not inherit from her husband; his sons did. But because Mahlon and Chilion are also both dead, Naomi has no choice but to sell the land. Land in ancient Israel was divided according to tribe. While a man might own his land, he essentially held it in trust for his tribe, not unlike how our church owns this property but holds it in trust for the denomination. Elimelech was part of the tribe of Judah and now Boaz is presenting to Elimelech's "brothers" – his fellow clan members – the opportunity to buy Elimelech's land so that it will remain in the tribe's possession.

This is an attractive economic opportunity for the nameless kinsman. He can acquire an additional parcel of land to farm, therefore increasing his wealth. He jumps at the opportunity to enrich himself...until he learns there is a catch. Redeeming the land means he will also inherit a social responsibility: He must marry Elimelech's widowed daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite.

Recall that the Moabites were Israel's enemies. Boaz calculates that the nameless kinsman's ethnic and political bias against the Moabites will outweigh his desire for the land. The calculation proves correct. When the nameless kinsman learns that he must introduce a Moabite woman into his family, he immediately changes his mind. "You can have the land...and the woman," he tells Boaz. He gives Boaz one of his sandals, symbolically wiping his hands of the matter.

In chapter two we reflected on how Boaz uses his privilege as a wealthy landowner to provide food for Ruth and Naomi and how he also protects Ruth from physical harassment. Now here, at the city gate, Boaz once more leverages his privilege and power to redeem not only Elimelech's property and family name but also permanently provide for Ruth and Naomi's welfare.

This is what it looks like to be an ally of the vulnerable – not performative signs like flags, banners, signs, and bumper stickers, but using whatever power and privilege we possess to help meet the needs of those Jesus has called the least of these. Some of you possess immense power and social or economic privilege relative to your neighbors. Others of you may be among the least of these, whether economically, physically, or socially. Yet as followers of Jesus, God has called each of us to the work of using what we have to show up for and care for each other, and to advocate for mercy and justice within our spheres of influence.

Because of his commitment to justice for Ruth and Naomi, Boaz is counted among the righteous. Righteousness is not simply keeping God's law; to be righteous is to pursue mercy and justice. Recall that in the New Testament Joseph is called a righteous man not only because he was pious but because he chose to wed Mary despite the scandal of her pregnancy with Jesus. Their marriage is an echo of Boaz's decision to marry Ruth despite the scandal of her ethnicity and foreignness.

Throughout this chapter, there are repeated references to the importance of preserving Elimelech's name. A man's name, passed down to his descendants, represented his legacy. But as the witnesses at the gate heap their blessings upon Boaz, they do not invoke the names of Israel's patriarchs. They invoke the names of her matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, who "built up the house of Israel" (v. 11 CEB). They also invoke the name of Tamar, a Canaanite woman who bore Perez to Judah. Boaz is Perez's direct descendant.

Now we watch as Ruth takes her place among the matriarchs of Israel. She stops being Ruth the Moabite, the foreign other, and is fully incorporated into the nation of Israel – the same nation whose law prohibited intermarriage and barred Moabites from citizenship (Deut 23:3). Boaz's marriage to Ruth disturbs the priestly codes about not mixing like with unlike. Ruth's ethnic identity enlarges our imagination for who may be counted among the people of God. The Greek word *xenos* can mean three things. It can mean stranger, which is how we get our word *xenophobia* – fear of strangers. But depending on the context, *xenos* can also mean guest and host. As we moved through the story of Ruth, we have watched as Ruth moves from stranger to guest to host as she takes her place in the community, a place she earns through her faithfulness to Naomi and Naomi's God. The community responds to her faithfulness with its hospitality. And so, we see how God's story advances through these twin values: fidelity and hospitality.

Verse 13 tells us that "Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife...the LORD let her become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son." This is the only place in the book where God explicitly acts. Up until this point the name of God has only appeared as people invoked blessings over each other. These blessings were worked out through the actions of the people who invoked them. But life and fruitfulness are ultimately God's gift. All good things come from God, the Creator who still looks upon His creation and calls it good.

Ruth bears a son named Obed, and the village women who received Naomi back into Bethlehem in the depths of her despair and bitterness now celebrate with her this arrival of new life. They identify Obed as Naomi's redeemer because he is the culmination of Naomi's redemptive journey from the emptiness of death to the fullness of life.

But the real redeemer in this story is not Obed, nor is it Boaz. It is Ruth. Although sons had more value than daughters, especially daughters-in-law and certainly *foreign* daughters-in-law, the townswomen declare Ruth has proved better for Naomi than seven sons! (v. 15) A foreign, childless widow who might have been considered a burden on Naomi proved to be the key person in Naomi's restoration to life and faith.

Ruth is not Naomi's blood kin, nor Elimelech's. So, while Obed carries on Elimelech's line, it is in name only. The Book of Ruth teaches us that our true kin,

true family, are not those with whom we share blood and genes. Our true kin are the people who cling to us and who we cling to, sacrificially. “A man shall leave his family and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh” (cf. Gen 2:24). We typically think of this passage as the biblical prototype for the marital intimacy between a man and a woman. But Ruth and Naomi’s story teach us that one flesh transcends the sexual relationship between a man and woman. One flesh exists wherever and to whomever we commit and cling for the sake of love. God has given us to each other because we need each other. In our mutual clinging we find healing; through our relationships with each other we are made whole by God.

The Book of Ruth concludes with a genealogy like the genealogies we find in Genesis. It lists the generations of Perez, who was the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. We are reminded that this story did not begin with Elimelech and Naomi and it will not end with Obed. He is only the next link in God’s great story of redemption. Obed becomes the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David, which makes Ruth David’s great-grandmother. And through the line of David, initiated by this immigrant woman from Moab, we eventually receive our ultimate redeemer, Jesus, through whom and by whom all of creation will one day be restored to new life. In the first chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Ruth is one of only four women listed in Jesus’s genealogy, alongside Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, the Hittite wife of Uriah. All four women were foreign and of questionable reputation, and yet they prepared the way for the birth of Jesus and the Gospel’s inclusion of all nations. And so, we join with Mary in her Magnificat, singing:

*He shows mercy to everyone,
from one generation to the next,
who honors him as God. (Luke 1:50 CEB)*

While certain factions within the American church are bent on pushing women and immigrants to the edges of society, the Book of Ruth reminds us that women and immigrants are central to God’s salvation narrative. Their *hesed* paved the way for the coming of the Messiah, who stands at the gates of life and presses for mercy and justice for all of us. As the body of Christ on earth, this mercy and justice is born out through our words and actions. May the story of Ruth remind us that we all have a part to play in God’s mighty work of redemption.

Thanks be to God. Amen.