

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

Text: Ruth 2

Theme: Gleaning and Hope

[prayer]

It has been said that life is full of coincidences. It has also been said that there is no such thing as a coincidence, that a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous.

Which do you think is true?

I think some things in life are truly coincidental. But I also believe, as a Christian, that life is full of the activity of God. God is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent – always present, all knowing, and all powerful. This does not mean that God is a cosmic puppeteer and we are all just marionettes waiting for our strings to be pulled. God has also given us the gift of free will. We have free agency to choose, to make decisions, and then to realize the consequences of those decisions. We are responsible for stewarding our lives as best as we can. The complex interplay between our wills and the will of God is ultimately a mystery that cannot be fully grasped or explained. But for those of us who truly seek to follow the will of God, there is an ultimate concordance between our initiative and God's providence.

John Wesley wrote, "Many a great affair is brought about by a little turn, fortuitous as to men, but designed by God" (*Notes*, Ruth 2:3). This is certainly the case for Ruth and Naomi. They arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Desperate to find food for herself and her despondent mother-in-law, Ruth decides that she has no choice but to glean the grain left behind in the fields by the harvesters. In Leviticus 19, God commands His people thus:

“When you harvest your land’s produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don’t gather up every remaining bit of your harvest. Also do not pick your vineyard clean or gather up all the grapes that have fallen there. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the Lord your God” (vv. 9-10 CEB).

Israelite law required landowners to practice charity by leaving some produce for those with no land of their own – aliens, widows, and orphans – so that they would not starve. Ruth goes to the fields to gather what has been explicitly left behind for her as a poor, widowed immigrant.

The most important phrase in this chapter is “As it happened.” “As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz” (v. 3). You could also say, “*Coincidentally*, she came to Boaz’s field” or even, perhaps, “*Miraculously*, she came to Boaz’s field.”

We already know that Boaz is related to Naomi through her deceased husband, Elimilech. But Ruth does not know this. Boaz is a wealthy landholder. He is responsible for his family and for his workers. But because of his privileged position, he also has a responsibility to care for the well-being of his community, to leverage his wealth and privilege to protect and uplift the most vulnerable. In Ruth he sees someone he has not only the power but the responsibility to protect. He is an honorable man because he takes that responsibility seriously. He shows Ruth special attention, making sure she can glean unmolested, inviting her to share the community meal, and sending her home with ample food.

If you know how this story ends, you may be tempted to believe that Boaz does this because he is physically attracted to Ruth. But Boaz is not especially interested in Ruth’s identity physical characteristics. He is interested in her character. The text reminds us repeatedly that Ruth is a Moabite. She is not from Judah; she is a foreigner, an immigrant. She is “other.” She has no right to expect any favor from this community. And yet, Boaz calls Ruth “my daughter” (v. 8). While Ruth does not know who Boaz is, Boaz knows who she is. When Ruth inquires why Boaz is showing her so much compassion, he reveals that he has heard of her faithfulness toward her mother-in-law, Naomi. Boaz responds to her, “Everything that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death has been reported fully to me: how you left behind your father, your mother, and the

land of your birth, and came to a people you hadn't known beforehand. May the Lord reward you for your deed" (v. 11-12).

Boaz's words echo God's first words to Abraham in Genesis 12: "'Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing" (vv. 1-2). It is a woman, and an immigrant at that, who reenacts Abraham's trek from the east into the Promised Land. Like Abraham, Ruth will become a founding mother of the nation of Israel.

By using the same familial language for Ruth that Naomi uses – "daughter" – Boaz claims Ruth as part of his own family. And family takes care of family. As patriarch, Boaz extends to Ruth the privileges of being part of his family: provision and protection.

Last week I pointed out that God does not speak in the Book of Ruth. There is no obvious divine action. There are only human beings, interacting with each other, coincidentally, miraculously. God acts through human circumstance and through the faithfulness of ordinary human beings. God's *hesed* – His faithful love – is embodied in human action. In the case of Ruth, God's *hesed* is embodied in the extraordinary compassion, hospitality, and generosity of Boaz.

Like Boaz, God's love and faithfulness is most often shown through our own acts of extraordinary compassion, hospitality, and generosity. Wesley taught that it is not enough for us to wait for the poor to come to us. Rather, we must practice social holiness by going to them, extending God's hand through acts of love and charity that center their needs and draw them away from the edges of society into the protective circle of community.

Ruth ends up gleaning an ephah of grain from Boaz's field – roughly equivalent to thirty pounds. She returns to Naomi and presents to her the grain and some leftover food from lunch. Naomi is astonished and asks Ruth who has been so extraordinarily generous toward her. When Ruth names Boaz, Naomi is overcome with awe – awe for Boaz's compassion but also awe for the mercy of God. Because not only has Boaz generously kept Ruth and Naomi from starvation, but this man is a relative and her nearest kin – literally "the one with the right to redeem" (v. 20). "Redeemer" is a legal term in ancient Israel. A childless, widowed woman

could be “redeemed” by her male kin, who would then marry her, providing her with children and making sure her inheritance was not lost.

But “Redeemer” also has a theological meaning. When Christians hear the word Redeemer, we think of Jesus, who has redeemed us from sin and death through his death and resurrection and given us an inheritance of eternal life. There are things that happen in life that have nothing to do with the will of God. But God still has the power to redeem anything that happens and transform it for His purposes. Paul tells us in Romans 8:28, “We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

In Boaz Naomi sees and experiences the redeeming hand of God. The same divine hand that Naomi accused of dealing her misfortune has now opened its palm in blessing. This is a turning point in Naomi’s story. She begins to turn from despair toward hope. A story that began with hunger ends with abundant food, and what was emptied in grief and sorrow is now being filled with the possibility of new life. God has not forsaken her.

I am reminded of the gospel hymn:

*Why should I feel discouraged?
Why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart be lonely
And long for heav’n and home,
When Jesus is my portion?
My constant Friend is He:
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me;
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know He watches me.¹*

Was it a coincidence that Ruth found her way to Boaz’s field? Or was it a miracle?

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/why_should_i_feel_discouraged_why_should

You decide. But I will say this: When we make the choice to turn toward God and align our wills with His, even the smallest of coincidences can start to feel like a miracle.

Amen.