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How Foolishly They Guard Their Nothing

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Ruth 2:1-23

{Ruth Meets Boaz}

2 Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." She said to her, "Go, my daughter." ³ So she went. She came and gleaned in the field behind the reapers. As it happened, she came to the part of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. ⁴ Just then Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, "The Lord be with you." They answered, "The Lord bless you." ⁵ Then Boaz said to his servant who was in charge of the reapers, "To whom does this young woman belong?" ⁶ The servant who was in charge of the reapers answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab." ⁷ She said, 'Please, let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the reapers.' So she came, and she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment."

⁸ Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." ¹⁰ Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" ¹¹ But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" ¹³ Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."

¹⁴ At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, and eat some of this bread, and dip your morsel in the sour wine." So she sat beside the reapers, and he heaped up for her some parched grain. She ate until she was satisfied, and she had some left over. ¹⁵ When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves, and do not reproach her. ¹⁶ You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles, and leave them for her to glean, and do not rebuke her."

¹⁷ So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸ She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." ²⁰ Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" ²² Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field." ²³ So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

In his book Everything Belongs, Richard Rohr tells of walking down a sidewalk in Albuquerque where homeless people congregate and also write graffiti on the sidewalk. One day, in beautiful script he saw this poem, "*See how foolishly man guards his nothing. Thereby keeping us out. Truly God is hated here.*" They do see us, you know – hurrying by, avoiding their eyes. Going to our lunch meetings. Or shopping. Or sightseeing in a city.

We see them. They see us seeing them. And the Lord sees us all. We have decisions to make, Friends, about how we shall live alongside these neighbors. Neighbors, some of whom are literally starving for things we regard as so much trash.

Shall we, like Naomi's kinsman Boaz, use the power of our privilege in ways that reflect we have actually read the Word and take it seriously as light and guide for the faith we claim? OR shall we also, in our lives and in our life together, prove the poet correct – as we so carefully guard our nothing, while the desperate watch and wonder what exactly we mean when we claim to know the Lord.

Let us pray:

May our confidence in your providence grow so deep and wide in us, O God, that we cling to nothing that our neighbor needs. Open our eyes to worldly privilege and forbid we ever name it blessing. When we draw upon it, Lord, may it be for justice and not for our own self-interest – as Jesus taught us with his own life. Amen.

Just a reminder: Ruth is not stealing from Boaz. The law of Israel allowed the poorest of the poor both to work in and eat from another man's fields, by virtue of their poverty. By the same law, Boaz was required to make allowance for the poor to work and eat from his farm.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22 reads:

¹⁹ *When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.*

²⁰ *When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.*

²¹ *When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow.*

²² *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

Just three years ago I had the most interesting conversation about this exact thing. Carl and I were on vacation in Costa Rica and took a day trip into Nicaragua – about a four-hour car trip, something like driving between Bloomington and Bloomfield on Hwy 45. Beautiful drive, terrible road, lined with farms and a small village every few miles. Along the highway, between the farm fencing and the highway, every half-mile or so, a mule or pig or a cow would be tied to the fence. Just one, with an ordinary rope. No farmer in sight. I asked our tour guide, Sandino, about it, “*Why do they tie their animals on the other side of their fence?*”

“*The animals don’t belong to the farmers,*” he said, “*they belong to villagers who have no grazing room, only a very small pen attached to their house. They bring them out here very early, let them graze all day and then walk them home again in the evening.*”

We also saw mules and horses, tied to fences in a small city park. I found this hilarious and Sandino asked why. “*Because Americans would not like it if you parked a cow on their grass without asking permission.*” To which he replied, “*But it’s grass. People don’t own grass.*” “*Wrong,*” I said. “*In the U.S. we definitely own our grass. We know exactly where the line is between our grass and our neighbor’s grass.*” Sandino was positive I was joking. “*That’s ridiculous,*” he said. “*It’s like saying you own all the fruit on the fruit tree in your yard.*” “*Exactly,*” I said.

“*No,*” he said. “*The tree belongs to you, but if a stranger walks by and he is hungry, he picks the fruit he needs to eat. And you are happy that he was able to eat from your tree that day.*” To which I said, “*Now you are being ridiculous. The tree is mine which means ALL the fruit is also mine. If you take my fruit without asking, that’s stealing.*” “*But it’s fruit,*” he protested, “*it’s FOR eating!*” They have a better grasp of this God-given economy than us, I think. Where food is not first of all a commodity – it is life. Life cannot be withheld by people who claim to know God.

My idea in chapter two is to fiddle with the characters of Boaz and Naomi a bit, listening and looking for anything they might tell or show us about what biblical faith looks like – either in the life of someone as poor and marginalized and bitter as Naomi or someone as affluent and powerful (that is, as privileged) as Boaz.

Boaz's first words in the Bible are to his workers: "*The Lord be with you!*" He outs himself as a believer; he claims to know God! Lots of people do. The text tells us Boaz was rich and a prominent leader of the community. Now we have a rich, powerful person claiming to know God. We're familiar with that too, of course. No one in this country gets elected to high office without claiming some faith in God. But the rest of their lives – and OURS – tells the truth about what they believe. Boaz is interested in the new woman, who we know is Ruth. But he doesn't. Yet.

The workers brag on her – how strong, how hardworking she is. He notices her, tells his men workers not to bother her. Your text might say *molest*. He reminds the same men again after lunch, "*Yeah, you can't bother her in the afternoon either. You can't bother, touch, tease her.*" Look at Boaz! Only 3000 years ahead of his time on sexual harassment in the workplace. It's not a small point, I think. He has political, social and economic power he's not flexing here – at least not to his own advantage. Holy law says he must let her glean. His world gave him full permission to do anything he wanted to her.

I give Boaz zero points for not being a creep himself. That's too low a bar to reward anyone for meeting. Especially one who claims to know the holy law. HOWEVER, I give him huge points for not allowing it in his company. Not in the morning. Not in the afternoon. Not on my watch. Go, Boaz! So far, so good. His walk matches his talk.

Second: He's required to let her glean; he's not required to feed her too. But lunch time comes along and Boaz notices Ruth has nothing with her to eat. That's how you know someone's poor: if they have to work to eat before they can eat to work.

I read an article recently about childhood hunger, about how the shame of having parents who can't or don't feed you is worse than the shame of letting people know you are hungry. Boaz knows she's poor because she showed up to work. He knows she's poorer than poor – that's she's hungry right now – because she has nothing when they stop for meal time. She hasn't any water either, and he offers to her what his men have carried to the field for themselves. He must have watched her wrap up half to take home to Naomi – and realized all the more, they are starving.

An ephah is almost a bushel, something like 50 pounds. Boaz might have said, "*The law let them glean the leftovers. That's fine, but I'm not running a charity here.*" But he didn't. "*Leave a little extra and pretend you don't notice when she picks it up,*" he says; "*don't harass her.*" He makes his living farming and yet the holy law seems all up in how he runs his business, in how he acts when he's at work.

I think it so important to remember, with Boaz as our model, that he is *at work!* We're at *church*. He is not. He's on a job, making bottom-line decisions, not only about the workers he employs but the poor people in his realm. THEY are part of his bottom-line business decisions on this ordinary work day. He does not yet know who Ruth is – maybe. I like thinking that he doesn't, that Boaz isn't operating out of special knowledge but out of his everyday faith, that he has gathered not just the letter of the law but its

intent into his heart and mind – the intent that rich and poor thrive together when times are good and they survive together when times are hard. The biblical economy was designed precisely to work that way. We spent lots of time on this just two years ago – at sabbath and jubilee times, remember? The seven-year clearance of debt and freeing of slaves, so families didn't fall into generational poverty. The right to redeem, which Naomi mentions here, will come up in our text next week when Boaz and Ruth are married. No such thing as Bible spoilers, because you've read it all.

Boaz carries himself as one who walks as well as talks in faith. His business is his to do with as he pleases, and he pleases NOT to guard it only to himself. Richard Rohr writes that when we find our true center – meaning our soul – we no longer need to guard our boundaries. Boaz seems much at home in his own soul, since the only thing he guards here is a hungry, vulnerable young widow trying to feed herself and her mother-in-law.

The book may be named for Ruth but the story begins and ends with Naomi. And we know, from the end of chapter 1, that Naomi believes herself cursed by God. Abandoned. What can one who feels divine abandonment teach us of faithfulness? I love verse 3 in King James, which reads like this: *Ruth came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz, who was of the kindred of Elimelech.*

“*Her hap was to light.*” Isn't that fantastic? Either it means “as luck would have it” or “by the hand of God.” I just love how it sounds. *Her hap was to light.* Old commentaries do love to argue the point, though. Was it a coincidence or the hand of God? Which is funny to me, given the rest of the story. Why doesn't it occur to any of them that Naomi is as clever as Jacob? Clever like a fox. Clever like tricky, cunning, conniving, crafty, wily, sly, scheming, and shrewd. Just shy of devious. Barely this side of deceptive. I'm not a Bible scholar, but I've read it dozens of times and I'm convinced nothing in this story is a coincidence. I'm convinced that Naomi concocted a crazy, far-fetched, dangerous plan beginning to end. And that she was as successful as Jacob, as blessed as Jacob, as critical to the arc of the story of Israel as Jacob – even if not as remembered – for her eyes-wide-open courage, in the face of almost impossible odds.

Her intention – it seems to me – when chapter 2 opens, is to NOT live hand-to-mouth, not feed herself for a day, but for her family to thrive. For generations. Because she too has read, or at least heard, the Bible. The same Bible Boaz knows, she knows – the one no part of which describes living hand-to-mouth as God's will for the poor. The one with the God-designed economy in which rich and poor thrive together as God's people. Meaning, her intention NOT to starve to death – that's a faithful intention, a Godly intention.

Of course, she's not powerful like Boaz. She's not rich like Boaz. But she is not entirely without resource. Without leverage.

What does she have?

I suggest three things: The first thing she has is a dead husband, two dead sons and no heirs. Which sounds like not much until you add a line of the law from Leviticus 25 that says if a man falls on hard times and has to sell property to survive, that man's kinsman has what's called a *right to redeem*, which means that his kinsman has the right buy the land from the person who bought it from her husband for what they paid for it plus interest, and the person who bought her husband's land is required to sell it to her husband's kinsman.

The second thing Naomi has is a daughter-in-law who is young enough to marry, but foreign. And the third thing she has is nerves of steel. Because what she's about to do is both crazy and dangerous. She lets Ruth think what they need is food. She executes a plan hoping for babies – generations of babies. And for babies, they were going to have to have a husband. A husband, ideally, with the right to redeem Elimelech's land. No way did Naomi NOT know who Boaz was. No way did Naomi NOT know *what* he was: rich. And powerful. No way did Naomi NOT know what fields were his. Ruth may have thought she got there by coincidence. No way was it a coincidence.

Of course it was dangerous. Fields were dangerous for young women. Boaz himself says so – thrice in a chapter! Did Boaz already know of Naomi's plan? I can't decide. It makes sense to me that Naomi would get the rumor started, about how practically perfect in every way Ruth was, then steer the rumor toward Boaz. Is she lying when she acts surprised to find out Ruth met him? That's a complicated question in these Bible stories; folks lie all the time and then the text praises them for being so wise and clever. Naomi doesn't get her due by Bible scholars, but to her friends in chapter 4 she's definitely a hero.

There's something so poignant about Naomi working out this complicated, sophisticated plan, all while she is literally without a penny or a piece of bread. I think about what qualifies as hard work in my life and my mind. Yesterday I went to the most wonderful event: International Family Welcome and Orientation. I made friends with an eight-year-old girl named Sarah who was born in Bloomington. She has a younger brother and sister and a much older brother who lives with their grandma in Mexico. She told me her mom works at Texas Roadhouse and her daddy works at Red Lobster, and she gave me the lowdown on why Texas Roadhouse is the far superior place to work. Her mom also volunteers as a translator at her little brother's pre-school.

I know someone else who works in a nail salon and has breast cancer, who is also being treated for breast cancer. She's having thirty radiation treatments over six weeks. She's relieved because she won't lose her job. She's worried because she will lose sixty hours of pay. They have a little girl here and parents back home depending on their income. She won't have side effects because she can't afford to.

Naomi doesn't go to the field – which isn't to say she isn't working to stay alive. Working Hard. I think she's busy as a bee, directing the action behind the scenes we are watching. I think she's putting Ruth in danger with the hope of saving them both. I love that Ruth

gets home with half a lunch and fifty pounds of grain – more food than they’ve probably seen in months – but Naomi’s first question is, “*Where did you work today? Tell me about the man you worked for.*” Ruth gives a full report. Naomi is thrilled with the results.

Go back tomorrow, she says. This is the verse where she is glad to know the field will be safe from sexual predators. Eugene Peterson actually translates her relief with something like, “*Yes, go there so we know you won’t get raped at some other field.*” Again, is that not a tragically low bar for a workplace? No known predators. Ruth went back every day until the harvest ended, the Bible says. At Boaz’s invitation. Setting the stage for the very, ummm, *delicate* scene which comes next in chapter 3. Naomi’s riskiest plan so far. Risky for Ruth most of all.

Her stage is set for now. Naomi and Boaz have not spoken yet. But each knows about the other. Ruth links them, innocent as she is to what is going on, beyond the fact that for now they have enough to eat. But she’s a foreigner, remember, a Moabite not expected to know the law like Boaz and Naomi. And in them it holds up beautifully. But there is still quite a bit to tell.

Would you pray with me?