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Faithfulness in the mess: following God during challenging times

Ruth 2: The life that we live sends a message!

1) Introduction

- Good morning! I am always grateful for the opportunity to speak to you guys, and I'm grateful for your willingness to listen to me.

- In preparing this message for this morning, I thought about all the times in my life that I've been introduced to someone new by a friend. A lot of those times, the person introducing me will say to the person that I'm meeting: "This is the guy I've been telling you about." It's either that or the person I'm meeting will say: "I've heard a lot about you."

- I don't know about you, but whenever that happens, I always get a little nervous. I start asking myself what they could have been told about me. What about me was worth mentioning? Was it good or bad?

- You've probably heard the phrase: "Your reputation precedes you." It's the idea that how we've lived or what we've done has already told other people what we're about.

- All of this to say, people that I hadn't even met or known about already had an idea of what kind of person I was because they'd heard about me from somebody else. I've seen this same kind of thing happen with other people that I know too, so I know it's not just me. It's helped me realize that people see the life that we live. What we do or say, the life that we live is noticed by others, and the life that we live sends a message.

- We're currently in the middle of a sermon series called Faithfulness in the Mess, looking at the person of Ruth in the Bible and her incredible example of faithfulness during a time of widespread unfaithfulness.

- Today, we'll be in Ruth 2, and as we read this chapter together, you won't help but see that Ruth's life sent a powerful message, even to people she hadn't met! Her reputation preceded herself.
- So this is the part where I'd like to invite you to turn in your Bible to Ruth chapter 2, whether that's a physical Bible, one on your phone, or just following along with the slides behind me.

2) Scripture

Ruth Meets Boaz in the Grain Field

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a man of standing from the clan of Elimelek, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek. Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The Lord be with you!" "The Lord bless you!" they answered. Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, "Who does that young woman belong to?" The overseer replied, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." "May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your servants." At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar." When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Let her gather among the sheaves and don't reprimand her. Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her." So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough. Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!" Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.

“The Lord bless him!” Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. “He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead.” She added, “That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers.” Then Ruth the Moabite said, “He even said to me, ‘Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.’” Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, “It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with the women who work for him, because in someone else’s field you might be harmed.” So Ruth stayed close to the women of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.

- Just before this, Ruth left behind her previous life to be with her mother-in-law Naomi. She left behind what she knew in Moab for the unknown in Bethlehem. This was all because of love and loyalty for Naomi. And when we ended chapter 1, the two of them travelled to Bethlehem and arrived just as the barley harvest had started.
- Now, some things about the Bible are going to seem strange to us, because we have a much different culture than the one during the time of Ruth (1100-1000BC).
- One thing that might seem strange to us as we read is this idea of gleaning. This idea of gleaning comes from the heart of our God and is found in his law to provide for and protect the poor, the foreigner, the widow, and the orphan. The description of gleaning is found in Leviticus 19 and 23, as well as Deuteronomy 24.
- The Law says that the edges of the grain field shouldn’t be harvested, and that the gleanings, or the leftover crop not picked up on the first pass through are to be left for the widow, alien, orphan, and the poor. (Sakenfeld, 72).
 - Analogy: Most of us know what food stamps are. It’s a provision in the law for low-income families to get help with their grocery budget so that they can have food on the table.
- Another thing that stands out is this thing called a “guardian-redeemer”. Unfortunately, back during the time of Ruth, widows did not have a lot of standing in society. A guardian redeemer was a man on the deceased husband’s side of the family who would take the widow under his care through marriage and protection.
 - This is like how a lot of people will put in their wills the name of legal guardians who will raise their children in their absence.

- Now, there are a lot of coincidences in this story. Ruth and Naomi just happen to arrive when the harvesting begins so they can glean. Ruth just happens to work in the field belonging to Boaz. Boaz just happens to be a redeemer for Naomi's family. It all seems too good to be true. I think this was all an act of God's provision and love for Ruth. It reminds me of a certain saying I've heard: "coincidence is when God shows up but chooses to remain anonymous." Clearly, God was at work in providing for Ruth.

- Gleaning would be incredibly helpful to Ruth and Naomi who have nothing to their names, but someone still has to get out in the field and harvest. Ruth, being younger, takes up the burden of harvesting for the two of them, but because she's an unfamiliar face in a small village, she stood out like a sore thumb..

- The other workers simply identified her as the Moabite from Moab. Just another foreigner that was out of place in Bethlehem. But Boaz was different. He wanted to know more about her and why she was there. He tried looking past appearances to see Ruth for who she really was.

- And at this point, Ruth doesn't even know who Boaz is. She is happy to serve and provide for her mother-in-law. When she finally speaks to him, even though she has a right in God's law to glean the crops, she decides to be incredibly polite and ask for his permission to do so.

- When she asks this, she is shocked by his response. He offers her a place in his field, protection from harm, food to eat, and water to drink. She got way better than she deserved as a foreigner and a widow. She's not one of his servants, or even someone he knows, right? Why does she get all this special treatment?

- Why does this happen? Because Boaz *did* know Ruth. Even though he didn't even know what she looked like, even though they hadn't met, Ruth's life and example told him all that he needed to know about her.

- Ruth's loyalty and kindness to Naomi was already known in their community, and the news of her example reached Boaz. He heard all about her kindness toward Naomi after the death of her husband. Ruth's life sent a strong message. It was a message of love, kindness, and maturity.
- None of this story is possible without Ruth's selfless love and faithfulness to Naomi. The life she lived sent a message and set an example. What she did had a ripple effect, and led to the Lord's blessing for her life in Bethlehem.

3) Application

- Looking around the room today, I don't think we have any Moabite women here. We definitely don't have anyone here from 1100BC. What does Ruth have to do with us in 2023?
- First, Ruth reminds us that it's in our actions, not just our words, that show other people who we are and what we believe in. The Bible has a lot to say about being known by the life that we live:
 - *1 John 3:7 – “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.”*
 - *Galatian 5:22-23 – “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control...”*
 - *Matthew 7:17-20 – “Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*
- The message is clear: we are known by the life we live!

- The second thing Ruth can teach us is that our life is seen by others. Ruth was blessed because her example of faithfulness was seen, known, and recognized by others.
 - Ruth's example even had an impact on people she didn't know, like Boaz. Boaz knew Ruth's character before he met her. Boaz heard all about Ruth and her kindness and faithfulness. Some translations of his "hearing all about her" even say that "he received a report of all her deeds".
 - The same thing is true today, people take notice of the kind of life we live, and drawing conclusions about who we are and who Jesus is from our behavior.
 - I never got to know Jim Walker, because he unfortunately was in retirement when I attended CCC for the first time. But I am confident that I know exactly what he was like. He was a confident and strong preacher rooted in God's word, he was a servant of the Lord who loved God and neighbor, and he impacted the lives of all who knew him positively for Christ.
 - How do I know all of that? Like Boaz with Ruth: "I've heard all about his ways..." from all of you.
- This should get us asking ourselves: What kind of example am I setting? What do people hear about my life?
 - If someone received a report on your life in Christ, what would it look like?
 - But first, do you know what an ambassador is? They represent their home country as an individual in a foreign land. How this person behaves is a direct reflection on their homeland.
 - 2 Cor 5:20 – *"Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us..."* We are ambassadors for Christ. How we

live reflects God's character to the outside world.

- When people hear about a church full of people that are like Ruth, people that care for and love one another deeply, where no one lacks anything and where Jesus is front and center, that sends a powerful message.
 - Also, when outsiders see a Church of people who sit in the same seats, treat the church like a social club, where we are hypocritical, where we put ourselves above others, and give up on each other, that sends a powerful message.
- Lifeway ministries did a survey on people 23-30 on why they left the church, and their reasons probably won't surprise you:
- 32% of people said the reason they stopped going was because they thought their church was hypocritical.
 - 29% of people said that they didn't feel connected to the people in their church.
- One way that we can improve our relationships with one another is by being like Boaz.
- When he saw someone he didn't recognize, he asked about her and tried to learn more about her. I'm the worst person when it comes to working up the nerve to talk to strangers, but they could very well feel like Ruth the Moabite: a foreigner who doesn't belong. Talk to them and welcome them. People stay where they are welcomed!
 - Second, be like Boaz and encourage someone for their faith and faithfulness. That doesn't mean that you have to give them a spot in your harvesting operation, but it could mean recognizing the ways they've resembled Jesus. We all need encouragement! (Heb 3:13)

- My prayer for us all this morning is that the message of our lives looks like Ruth's: one of faithfulness, kindness, love, and loyalty.

4) Conclusion

- The life we live sends a message, and it has an effect on the lives around us. Jesus' own life sent a message as well, one that shows us how much he loves and values us. I would encourage you to unite yourself to that love through baptism and to be filled of his Holy Spirit.
- This morning, if you are in Christ, think about how you can better serve him by living more like him, because how you live sends a message.