

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the descendant of Ruth, our Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

We're coming to the end of the story of Ruth. We've walked with Naomi, Ruth and Boaz through normal family life, periods of grief, and times of poverty and struggling to survive and back to a new normal in Bethlehem with a new family and a new hope for the future. We've witnessed the loyalty of Ruth, the hopelessness of Naomi and the generosity of Boaz. Now, life has come full circle. With the marriage of Boaz to Ruth the story returns to normal family life—and the continued revealing of God's will. I have to admit the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz has some really strange traditions and customs, but beyond all the marriage traditions and the shoe exchange customs, this is a story that moves from despair to joy, from childless, friendless, and penniless to rejoicing with family, an heir, and a legacy. This epic saga displays God's all-encompassing compassion and God's desire to include all people into the great plan of salvation of the whole world. I'm not going to use my precious short sermon time to try to explain these really weird ancient customs like exchanging one sandal to seal a transaction... My guess is they didn't have paper to give as a receipt, so exchanging shoes was the next best thing... If we can get past the weird ancient traditions and instead focus on what this wonderful story reveals about human nature and about our God, then the story

of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz becomes much more relevant for us all these years later...

Fourteen times in these four short chapters Ruth is referred to as coming from Moab or being “that Moabite woman.” The author certainly didn’t want us to forget who Ruth was and where she came from. During a time in Israelite history when keeping the faith pure from unclean outsiders was of utmost importance, we have this epic story of inclusion and redemption. After the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding area from their captivity in Babylon, the desire to keep their faith pure from outside influences really kicked in. When the Hebrew people were defeated by the Babylonian army, the rich and educated were deported into Babylon. They spent at least 3 generations in a foreign land where they worked diligently to keep the influences of the pagan Babylonian religion out of their Jewish faith. They didn’t allow marriages between the Jews and the Babylonians or any other interactions that might have led to the defilement of their worship of the God of Israel. After returning to Judah these ultra-purist Hebrews discovered that the people left behind hadn’t been nearly as diligent in keeping the faith pure from the influences of outside religions. In fact, as the Babylonian army deported the rich and educated Jews out of Judah they imported other poor and uneducated people from other foreign lands into the region. When the Jews returned from captivity to their home, they discovered that many of those that had

been left behind had married foreigners and incorporated some of their pagan religious practices into the worship of their God, Yahweh. This caused a lot of distress because of how hard those who were returning from Babylon had worked to remain pure to Yahweh. They even went so far as to try to force those who had intermarried, to divorce their spouses and renounce their children... Many scholars believe this was the context into which Ruth was written. It was a story to illustrate just how inclusive this God actually is. Imagine how shocking this story would have been to those purists in and around Jerusalem and Bethlehem at that time.

I told you the first week when we began focusing on the book of Ruth that there was going to be a surprise ending. The surprise and the shock to the original intended audience of this story is that not only were Ruth and Naomi redeemed and taken in by a well-respected man of means in Bethlehem, but this Moabite foreigner has now become the mother of Obed, grandmother of Jesse and great-grandmother of the greatest King in Israel's history up until that time, King David. The topsy turvy story even goes a giant step further. Not only is Ruth the Great-Grandmother of King David, she is also included in the lineage of our redeemer and savior, Jesus Christ. How's that for a surprise turn around in fortune!

The story of Ruth shows us there are no boundaries to God's inclusive love and salvation. I wonder what boundaries we set up that exclude others today.

Boundaries are good things, generally. When I think about the boundaries of our country I want us to be a kind and welcoming country that helps those who are poor or persecuted in their own homeland. On the other hand, I want our government to keep us safe from allowing terrorists and people with Covid from entering. People on the right side of the aisle claim our border is too wide open and people on the left side of the aisle say we're only doing what is right and honorable by allowing all those claiming asylum to come and enjoy all that the United States has to offer. There has to be a path somewhere in the middle where we can offer safety and security to both those seeking a better life here in America while still providing for the security and safety of people who are already citizens of this great land. I certainly don't have all the answers, but I do try to understand both sides and to pray about our boundaries and borders and for those who guard those boundaries every day.

Ruth was undeterred, even when instructed by Naomi to return to her own family and kind in Moab. Instead, she pressed on with Naomi, pledging her undying faithfulness to her mother-in-law. Like all those people in caravans suffering as they walk thousands of miles from South America, through Mexico to our southern border, Ruth walked by faith. She had no idea that her kindness to Naomi would lead to God's ultimate kindness toward her.

The story of Ruth is also a story about generosity. Ruth generously gave everything to Naomi. Her loyalty cost her a chance at a “normal” life with her own family and her own countrymen. Boaz is the epitome of generosity. He first protected Ruth and Naomi by allowing Ruth to glean from his fields. Then, after clearing the hurdles of religious law, he made the ultimate commitment to both women by marrying Ruth and promising to take care of all their needs. Generosity is a blessing for those with whom gifts are shared and also for the person who shares the gift. Ruth and Naomi have been blessed, but Boaz's life has been enriched, also. Not only is generosity a blessing, it is also a characteristic of people who follow the Lord. Generosity is an action through which God's will can be expressed. We are made by God to be generous people and I believe generous people are by far the happiest people on the planet. By definition generous people don't attach their self-identity to their possessions. If they did, they simply would not be able to be generous. Generous people know the same God who has already given them so much, will continue to give them even more. It's an attitude that comes from abundance. It's an attitude born out of being satisfied with what we have and knowing God will always provide for tomorrow.

Throughout the book of Ruth we see glimpses of God's steadfast love. Even in the first chapter when Naomi declares that her name should be “Bitter” because the Lord is treating her bitterly, we can see God's steadfast love. No matter what

state Naomi and Ruth find themselves, God is present and God's steadfast love is part of their lives. This love isn't a mystical love. This love is expressed in the words and actions of people. We see this love in the loyalty of Ruth, and in the generosity of Boaz. We also see it in the birth of children that lead to King David and eventually to Jesus the Christ.

As we come to the end of Ruth's story, we can take away three things: a renewed sense of comfort, strength and hope. Our good news for today is that just as God looked after Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, so God is looking after all of us. No matter where we are in life, God is with us, and God's love will never be separated from us. As the psalmist writes in Psalm 136, "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases and his mercies never come to an end. They are new each morning." May the Lord continue to bless us each morning and make us into his kind and generous people, because in a world where you can be anything, we can be kind!
Amen.