

## "Fields of Grace"

### "Biggest Losers in the Bible" part 2

*Ruth 2:1-23*

**[title slide]** *Welcome, prayer.*

When has your life changed because of the sudden, unexpected kindness of a stranger? NPR recently published a series of articles called, "My Unsung Hero," stories about "people whose kindness left a lasting impression on someone else." One story by Autumn Barnes especially caught my attention.

**[NPR photo]** Life was falling apart for a woman named Alie. Among other challenges, her dad was diagnosed with cancer. She said, "I remember days when I would think, 'I only cried four times today.' That was a good day for me." Alie had an unusual hobby to distract her: she liked to take pictures of bugs and post them on Facebook. An entomologist at the natural history museum, Lila, saw those pictures and asked if Alie would be interested in touring the museum's insectary. I love Alie's quote:

"For most people in the middle of a really heinous year, where everything's falling apart around them, and the people they love the most are deteriorating, ... 'Do you want to come see 40 cockroaches in a fish tank?' [is] not what most people would [say] 'absolutely' to," Ward said.

Lila greeted Alie at the door of the museum. Lila had no idea how Alie was suffering and "probably didn't expect someone jittery and tear-stained to meet her..." Lila handed Alie a lab coat and walked her through the different exhibits. Lila's excitement was contagious, and Alie began to feel better. Lila even asked Alie if she would like to volunteer at the museum. Listen to what Alie said:

"She just knew that I could possibly be happy there, and maybe I would have something to offer....But at the time I really felt like I didn't have a lot to offer many people. I was a wreck. I was crying constantly and I was really preoccupied.... [Volunteering] gave me [a] sense of purpose."

After volunteering for many weeks, Alie quit her job and started working in science media. She now has a podcast called Ologies. Lila, of course, was the first guest on her show.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/19/1199442736/an-unexpected-invitation-from-a-stranger-changed-her-life-trajectory>

I’ll be the first one to admit I’m grossed out by cockroaches, but the Lord works in more mysterious ways than that. We are facing a time more than ever when strangers, especially foreigners, are looking for kindness. That’s what we want for ourselves, and that is what Christ expects us to show others.

**[title slide]** The story of Ruth and Boaz is older than the insect exhibits in LA, but it shares a similar plot, perhaps even more dire than the situation Alie found herself in.

**[Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah]** The background of Ruth is important to understand the dire straights Ruth and Naomi were in. Chapter one explains: Naomi and her husband left Bethlehem because of a famine and settled in the neighboring country of Moab. This all took place in the time of Judges, when Israel had no king, and there were a lot of wars, including with Moab. Ruth and her sister married Naomi’s two sons. The trouble is, both Naomi’s husband and her sons died in a short period, leaving three widows with no way to care for themselves. Orpah, Ruth’s sister, stayed behind in Moab, but Ruth chose to follow Naomi back to Bethlehem, even though it meant Ruth would live her life as an immigrant, and not a popular one at that.

**[Ruth gleaning]** So, here’s the scene: Ruth sets out to find food. At the time, there were only two options: beg or glean. Gleaning is hard work. It means going into the fields after the harvesters, who are swinging their sickles around and gathering the sheaves – basically putting all the good grain in bunches to bring back to the barns. It’s kind of like bailing hay. The gleaners, however, have to bend over the ground and pick up whatever was dropped. All day. In the hot sun. And with no ice cream breaks or chiropractors.

Gleaning, especially for a foreign woman, was dangerous work. She could have been caught, beaten, abused, and even killed. Although there were laws and customs that should have protected Ruth, there was no one to defend her. She was on her own.

**[Boaz sees Ruth]** Enter Boaz, a wealthy farmer with lots of land and employees to work it. He comes out to the field and blesses his workers – the first indication of what kind of man he was, not content to stay indoors, but actually help with the harvest. He immediately notices Ruth and asks about her. He is told not only she’s a foreigner, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, but also she

has asked permission to glean, and with the exception of one short break, she’s been working hard all day. This clearly impresses Boaz.

Stop and think for a moment. If you were a wealthy landlord, would you stop and notice the gardener, sweating in the sun, especially if they were clearly an immigrant? Would you even stop to talk to them, thank them for their hard work? Sadly, that’s not our first instinct. Ours is, get inside to the AC and get something cold from the frig.

Yet, listen again to their conversation: **[5 slides with verses]**

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.”

<sup>10</sup>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?”

<sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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.”

<sup>13</sup>“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.”

**[Ruth and Boaz]** Notice the humility of Ruth and the respect of Boaz. He doesn’t treat her like an inferior. He certainly could have. He has the money, the power, and the status. In their society and time, women had few rights. Boaz owed Ruth nothing, and yet he gave her everything he could.

Boaz doesn’t judge Ruth, even though she’s a foreigner, poor, and alone. Boaz spoke well to all his harvesters, not just Ruth. Boaz recognized Ruth’s

sacrifice. He knew the danger Ruth was in, and he enlisted others’ help, trusting his team to protect her. Boaz spoke to Ruth as an equal, even though she demurred in her words. He shared his food with her. He told his crew to help her without her really knowing it, by pulling extra stalks of grain out and letting them “accidentally” fall to the ground, saving her embarrassment and extra work. And he did all this, despite the fact that Ruth never asked for help.

**[Boaz]** Boaz was compassionate in his actions and his words. He risked his own reputation but thought nothing of it. The story seems to indicate that’s just the kind of man he was.

**[Boaz and quote]** John Maxwell wrote that the Boaz was “the leader who went the extra mile.” Boaz’s giving was marked with compassion and true concern. He wasn’t helping her for show. He was truly a kind and generous person. Maxwell says, “You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.”<sup>2</sup>

You probably know the rest of the story, or can guess. Boaz redeems Naomi’s family. Ruth and Boaz get married. Their child becomes the grandfather of King David. While much emphasis is given to Ruth’s actions in this story, I want us to think about our generosity in light of Boaz’s actions.

**[earthquake]** For starters, remember, this was immediately after a horrible famine. Are we more generous or more miserly after a calamity? Take the recent COVID pandemic. At the beginning, I saw lots of compassion. My church started a temporary food pantry, enough to get people by until state assistance could take over. In the wake of natural disasters, people are more likely to help and give. We see that every year when we receive our special offering for UMCOR – the United Methodist Committee on Relief.

**[world map and hands]** Yet, in the long term, we have to ask ourselves, are our hearts in the right place? Enthusiasm for helping fades. More disasters take place. We feel like we’ve already given enough. Or worse, we get angry at those around us who we feel unfairly use “our” resources, forgetting that those resources were not ours to begin with. Hebrews 2:10 reminds us, “Everything belongs to God, and all things were created by his power.” (CEV)

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.thenivbible.com/blog/boaz-leader-who-went-the-extra-mile/>

**[quote]** Boaz wasn't worried about giving too much, and neither should we. C.S. Lewis once said, “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.” Giving is about responding to need, but more importantly, it's about responding to God. God wants us to be generous people. Last week, I said, “Be a Barney. Be an encourager!” Now I'm saying, “Be a Boaz. Be a compassionate, generous person.”

**[crosses]** God doesn't call us to be generous in a vacuum. It starts with Jesus. Jesus has already given us everything he has, his very life. While we were stuck in our sin, our backward thinking, and our depravity, Jesus came to this earth and showed kindness, generosity, and true sacrifice. He died on a lonely cross, rose again on the third day, and offered everyone who would receive it a chance to have a new life. If we were even a fraction as generous as Jesus is, the world's problems of famine and poverty would end overnight.

**[title slide]** So what are we to do? Boaz and Ruth make for a fine story, but I'm more concerned about the story you are writing in your life, with your words, actions, and giving. We talk about stewardship from the point of view of the giver. We need to be generous people. Yes, I believe in the ministries of this church, and I personally tithe – I give ten percent of my income – so that God can work through this congregation. Certainly, there is no other source of income in this place other than what we all give in the offering. But more importantly, every dollar, check and online gift represents a heart that is changed, a person who believes in the love God has for them.

You'll never out-give God. Ruth didn't spend the rest of her life trying to pay Boaz back. She received his generosity with humility, and it caused her to work even harder and be even kinder to others. That's what God's generosity in Jesus can do for us, and that's what our generosity will do for others, if we surrender who we are and what we have to God. I fully believe that, and I intend to live that way. I pray that is your response as well.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse

"If you are harvesting in your field and forget a sheaf there, do not go back to get it. It is to be left for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands." - Deuteronomy 24:19

### Reflection Questions

1. Why do people have an innate fear of the "other"? Why do immigrant rights and racism continue to be hot topics in our society?
2. What did Ruth risk by remaining with her mother-in-law Naomi?
3. What did Boaz risk by showing compassion to Ruth?
4. What was the most surprising act of kindness Boaz showed to Ruth? Why was it surprising to you?
5. How has God shown kindness to you? Do you feel like you're a stranger to God?
6. How do you show love to others? Are you generous with your resources, even toward strangers?