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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Ruth 2

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Kindness

Opening Greeting and Prayer: Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning. And good morning to all of you who are joining us online. Welcome to all of our guests this morning. We are glad that you are here. Let us pray: God of enough and abundance, we thank you for the ways that you have provided for us and made space for each one of us in your coming and present kingdom. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Message: Ten years ago, I left for Lesotho, a tiny country in southern Africa, with MCC. While there, I worked at an elementary school and helped with various projects at a local mission, a training center for sustainable farming practices. Most rural families in Lesotho grow their own corn, or what they call maize, on their own small pieces of property usually surrounding their homes. Because the entirety of Lesotho is within the Drakensberg mountains of Southern Africa, farming can be a challenging endeavor, especially with erosion along hillsides. Even as people take on more advantageous farming practices, raising a worthwhile crop is difficult. Often, a rural family's goal is to raise enough food for the family to eat for the next year. Most rural families can live on two to three 50 lb. sacks of corn per year, but this is only enough for survival, not for thriving. The shelled corn after harvest is taken to a local mill, where the family will grind a portion of their corn to eat, while leaving the rest until it is needed. We call this

subsistence agriculture, or only growing enough food to live on. If you can picture what I have just described, then you are one step closer to understanding the situation in Ruth chapter 2.

We do not know how much time has passed since the last episode, when Naomi entered the village of Bethlehem and calls on her neighbors in anguish that her new name will be Mara because God has dealt bitterly with her. We can still hear the echoes of her sadness and despair as we begin the second chapter. A world away from the plight of the widows, Naomi and Ruth, is Boaz, a prominent rich man or a man of substance. Boaz is one of Naomi's late husband's relatives. We know little about Boaz, except that he owns or manages enough land and crops that he does not have to work the harvest. The young men, the reapers, and the young women, the gleaners, will get the work done. We also know from Boaz's greeting that he is a man of piety or religious conviction. Boaz is a man who fears the Lord God.

Coming from Bethlehem, Boaz is interested in how the harvest is coming along. When he arrives, he notices a young woman, one that he has not seen before, so he asks the lead worker whom she belongs to. Remember that in ancient near east cultures, women had no status outside of the men that they were connected with by birth or marriage. The manager of the reapers tells Boaz that this is the Moabite woman that came with Naomi, the widow of Elimelech, when Naomi returned from Moab. Notice that the manager does not even know her name, only her purpose and need. Beyond her anonymity, we know little of why Boaz is interested in Ruth. The man in charge of the reapers gives her a glowing review, telling Boaz that she is a hard worker, having been gleaning since she arrived and taking no time to rest.

In this moment, I wonder if our privilege speaks to how we might read this story. We must remember that Ruth and Naomi are driven by desperation and survival. Like in Lesotho, where rural families are dependent on the corn that they grow each season, so these two widows

are entirely dependent on the younger widow's bodily strength and the kindness of male farm-workers and landowners who could harass them, threaten them, take their grain, or worse. It is easy for the manager of the harvesters and Boaz to make comments and notice Ruth's hard work, but they know little of her actual experience or the daily difficulties that she endures. And we must remember when we make comments about the impoverished or destitute or desperate among us, that we are just as ignorant of their situations. I like to think that I work hard, but I know little of working hard to survive, to get the next meal on the table, or to sooth my fears.

In chapter 1 of Ruth, we noted the Hebrew word *khesed*, which appears again in chapter 2. Ruth, the widow, orphan, and foreigner all in one, the most vulnerable person in our story, shows *khesed* to her mother-in-law by committing her life to Naomi's well-being and survival in Israel. Naomi is convinced that God has it out for her, but Ruth will not let her go. In Chapter 2, we see Ruth in her vulnerability and desperation walk into the fields of a people not her own to meet the most pressing need of her situation, the need for food. In chapter 2, Boaz extends *khesed* to Ruth. In case you have forgotten, *khesed* is steadfast or unfaithful love; it is also translated as kindness that goes beyond requirements of the Mosaic law and beyond the expectations of the recipient. Ruth returns from her first day in the fields with enough food for Naomi and her to eat for several weeks at least, much more than they expected. An ephah of barley, according to one commentator, might be around 30 lbs. of grain. If we're remembering my description of life in rural Lesotho, an ephah could be about half of a sack of grain, which in Lesotho would be enough for 2 to 3 months depending on the size of the family or household. And Ruth's success is only from gleaning or picking up the extra that had been left behind. We, as the audience, though know that her success is also because of someone's kindness, Boaz's demonstration of *khesed*. What is most interesting about this moment is that while Naomi and

Ruth are celebrating the abundance of Ruth's first day gleaning, Boaz has returned to Bethlehem, having risked little of his livelihood, yet ensured the survival of the vulnerable in his community.

Something else has happened though in our story that is worth noting. The beginning of a relationship, the start of a romance that goes further than extending kindness. In their first conversation, Boaz speaks to Ruth as she gleans in the field that she can stay close to his workers without concern or fear because he has told the young men to not bother her. He has also provided her a source of water to drink. Ruth is astounded at his words, wondering how he could show such preference for her, a foreigner whom, I'm sure, others have looked at with anything but concern or admiration. He does not allow her to belittle herself, but retells her story as one of bravery and commitment just as the story of the patriarchs, Abraham and Sarah, were brave in leaving their family and homeland to follow God to an unknown place. For what she has done in coming alongside her widowed mother-in-law, Boaz calls for a blessing from God, a reward from the Lord, in whom Ruth has sought refuge even as an outcast.

Ruth still cannot believe it and, in what sounds almost sarcastic, tells Boaz that she hopes that the favor, comfort, and kindness of his words will continue beyond just this moment. Are Ruth's words a subtle challenge to Boaz to put his actions behind his virtuous words? I wonder here too if Ruth's sarcasm comes from the days since arriving in Bethlehem when she has been snubbed, insulted, alienated, or worse because she is not an Israelite. After this initial conversation, Boaz seems to be intrigued by Ruth's presence in the fields. He calls for her to eat with him during lunch, giving her more than she can even eat, enough that she was satisfied and had some left over. Like the writer of the 23rd Psalm, Ruth's cup is overflowing with enough food and a growing romance with Boaz; he might be the solution to her plight as a foreign woman in an unknown land and a source of security for Naomi, too.

What we find at the end of chapter 2 is that things seem to be turning around for Ruth and Naomi. Their most present needs have been met in the grain that Ruth has brought home from her first days in the field. It appears also that because of the kindness or *khesed* of Boaz, Ruth might be able to secure enough from her gleaning over the whole wheat and barley harvest that at least their physical needs might be satisfied well into the future. Not only that, but Ruth has found a space where she is safe to work and able to focus on providing for Naomi and her. We have not heard much of what God is doing or seems to be doing though. Is God to be praised for the provision that has come to Ruth and Naomi? Does Boaz have deeper ulterior motives for showing such kindness to Ruth? Sometimes, it is in the day-to-day experience, the normal, the steady droll of life that we struggle to find God's presence just like in this story, so I challenge you to do some gleaning this morning. The word that is translated into *glean* in our text this morning occurs twelve times in chapter 2 alone. Just as Ruth picks up the bits and pieces left behind by the harvesters, what bits and pieces of insight and truth are you picking up from our story? What are you gleaning as the Spirit speaks to your heart and mind? How will it be crushed into usable ingredients for spiritual food, for nourishment for your spirit, bits of energy for the coming week? How will it speak to your experience as you begin to notice God working in your day-to-day life as God was in Bethlehem with Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz long ago?

Closing Prayer: Let us pray, God of provision and sustenance, God of enough and overflowing, fill us with your Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, insight, and wisdom. Help us to glean the bits and pieces of our experiences that reveal how you are working in us, around us, and through us as you were in Ruth's story. Strengthen our faith, help our unbelief, forgive our arrogance that we would humbly seek your presence in the day-to-day, in each new breath. In Jesus' name, Amen.