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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Ruth 3

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Loyalty

Greeting and Opening Prayer:

Good morning to all of you who join us online this morning. Welcome to all of our guest as well. We are so glad that you are here. Let us pray: God of unfailing love, kindness, and loyalty, we look to you this morning as we gather together. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus name, amen.

Message:

Deuteronomy 24:17-22 says, “You shall not deprive a foreigner or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow’s garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I am commanding you to do this.”

When I hear these verses from Deuteronomy, I think of Ruth and Naomi's experience. Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite living in the land of Judah in Israel with her mother-in-law. Ruth is an orphan, having left behind all of her birth family in her home country. Like Naomi, she is also a widow without children or heirs to the family inheritance of Elimelech. Without an heir, the family's land will be bought by someone else, a tragedy in ancient cultures. Ruth needs a husband to have children, but not just any husband if she wants to truly provide security for Naomi. Ruth and Naomi need a redeemer or close relative who can provide marriage for Ruth, an heir for Naomi, and redemption of the family land.

The above description forms the background of Ruth chapter 3. Remember what has happened thus far in our story: Ruth and Naomi have returned to Bethlehem in Judah from Moab, both husbandless and childless. In seeking grain for their daily meals, Ruth happens to glean in Boaz's fields where he notices her during one of his visits. After a couple of conversations in the fields, a budding romance has begun. Boaz, a relative of Naomi's and landowner in Bethlehem, tells Ruth that she can continue to glean in his fields for the rest of the harvest, which provides a long-term solution for these widows' precarious food situation.

Now that Ruth and Naomi know at least that they will have food and shelter through the coming months or even years, they begin discussing possibilities for filling other parts of their emptiness. We listen in on one of these conversations at the beginning of Ruth 3. Naomi has formed a plan to bring, at least, Ruth security. She tells Ruth to bathe, anoint herself, and put on her best clothes. Then Ruth must go down to the threshing floor where the farm workers thrash the wheat and barley grain from their sheaves. Boaz will be there. We are given any reason for Boaz's presence there, especially since he would have had workers to handle this work, but Ruth is to wait for him to lie down for the night near the grain pile. She is then supposed to go to

where he is, uncover his feet, and lay down there. Naomi tells her to wait then until Boaz notices her presence; then he will tell her what to do. In any situation that Ruth is caught with a man at the threshing floor, she would be scandalized and excluded even more severely than she already has been. She's taking a great risk in seeking Boaz in the middle of the night.

Notice how drastically the setting changes for this encounter between Ruth and Boaz. In chapter 2, Boaz and Ruth interact in the light of day, eating lunch together and conversing in the field. In chapter 3, Ruth seeks Boaz in the night, dark enough to mask any face. Ruth is concealing her presence at the threshing floor, rather than going directly to the harvesters and asking if she can glean. Her interaction with Boaz is intentional, while it was by chance in chapter 2. While the fields end up being a safe space for Ruth because of Boaz's kindness, Ruth's current venture to the threshing floor at night would be filled with potential risks and dangers. For a woman to be wandering alone in the middle of the night in her best clothes would be risky for all of the wrong reasons. Suddenly the childless widow has also taken on the role of the temptress, a quite powerless position in light of any of the possible assumptions or decisions that men might make about her if they catch her sneaking around at night.

Boaz wakes up, startled to find a woman next to him. He asks her, "Who are you?" and Ruth responds, "I am Ruth, your servant." In this instance, Ruth does not remind Boaz that she is a foreigner, which is lower in status than a servant, as she did in their first meeting. She, instead, tells him that she is a woman available for marriage, which is translated as servant. Ruth then uses the blessing that Boaz spoke to her in the fields, asking that he fulfill his own words. Ruth is asking Boaz to marry her, to provide security for both her and Naomi. In marriage, Ruth will find security, and in the offspring of the marriage to the family redeemer, Naomi will find security in an heir who can inherit the family name and land. We must remember though that Ruth is

ultimately powerless in this moment. Boaz has little to lose. He can accuse her of attempting to seduce him, of sneaking in the night to his side so as to defame or ruin him, and Ruth would have no recourse. She has risked everything in this moment. Will Boaz stand by all that he has already claimed about Ruth? Will he fulfill the blessing that he has called on God to give to her?

Boaz commends her loyalty to Naomi, her example of *khesed* again. Remember that *khesed* can mean steadfast or unfailing love, kindness, or loyalty that extend beyond what is expected and beyond whatever the recipient deserves. Ruth, the temptress, widow, orphan, and foreigner is our story's stunning example of *khesed*. Ruth has been strategic when she did not have to be. She could have sought other men in the community to provide her security, but she could only make room for Naomi by seeking out particular men. Boaz is one of them, and he knows it. Boaz goes even further though in his comments to Ruth, telling her to not fear what might happen because the entire community will see how she truly is a worthy woman, or a woman of substance. This phrase should sound really familiar. Boaz has just used the same term to describe Ruth that was used to describe him. Though not in the eyes of their neighbors, they are equals now, the Moabite woman and the affluent Israelite landowner.

Boaz says yes to this unconventional request, but an obstacle still lies in their way. One other male relative will have the first chance to offer Naomi redemption. Boaz tells Ruth to lay down for the night until morning, probably her safest option so that she can make it back to Naomi's house. Because of the mysteriousness of the language used and the possible double-meanings of several of the Hebrew words in their conversation at the threshing floor, we are left literally in the dark as to whether or not Boaz and Ruth have consummated their relationship in any physical way. As a symbol of Boaz's commitment, though, to both Ruth and Naomi, he sends even more grain with Ruth, a sign to Naomi that his intent is sincere. We end chapter 3

with the last words that either Ruth or Naomi will speak for the rest of the story. They have done all that they can; now they must wait and see.

Some interesting realities shine forth from this chapter in Ruth. We may struggle, just as we did in chapter 2, to understand the desperation that drives Ruth and Naomi to these risky situations, but we must enter their story with all of the empathy that we can muster. With what little power or agency that they do have in ancient Israelite culture, they make their best plans for achieving the security that they cannot guarantee for themselves. And maybe it is in these stories that we find out how little we may or may not understand of the experience of people that are not like us. I wonder in this moment who the Ruth's and Naomi's of Freeman might be. But I cannot only stop there in my reflection; I must dig deeper so that I, like Boaz, begin to see or notice how the Ruth's and Naomi's of our community could actually be examples of *khesed*, of unfailing love, kindness, and loyalty. This story forces us to look beyond our own assumptions or caricatures of people not like us, those even who might, like Ruth, have pushed the boundaries of moral or ethical conduct in order to survive. This story forces us to begin to see attributes of God Almighty even in those we least understand or identify with, in the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the stranger, the other.

Closing Prayer:

God of unfailing and steadfast love, open our eyes to see, our ears to listen, and our hearts to discern your will and way in the world, even in those who are not like us. Fill us with your spirit that we could live into your way of *khesed*, that we could extend kindness, loyalty, and love that extend beyond cultural expectations of us and beyond what anyone else deserves. Fill us with your overflowing and abundant grace and mercy for the days ahead of us. In Jesus name, Amen.