

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
A Legacy of Grit and Grace
November 7, 2021
Ruth 3-4

Two widows make their way into an unknown future. They are resilient, but they need some help to come from somewhere. Here's Naomi, whose husband died along with her two sons. And Ruth, who had been married to one of the sons. They come from Moab, cross the river, and make their way to Naomi's hometown Bethlehem. The place looked familiar to Naomi. She'd been here years before in happier times, before the drought and the financial collapse and their emigration to Moab and the deaths. Happier times seemed long away now. For Ruth, everything was new and a little scary. She was now the foreigner in a strange land.

The road of life looks like it has come to a cul-de-sac for these two. The end of the road. The party's over. Turn off the lights. If you want to find Naomi and Ruth in the future, don't bother. Their names, their stories, and their lives will disappear from any history that anyone knows or cares about. If that's what you hear whispered about these two, that's reasonable. We can't see into the future, but we can make our best guess at what the future holds for someone just by looking at them and their situation. Looking at these two, a person would be forgiven for saying: Move along, nothing to see here. Let them be. Let them die. Let them be forgotten.

But how much do you know about your grandmother and your great-grandmother? I know you've got one, more than one actually, but how much do you know? Have you listened to their stories? Have you imagined her way of life? My great-grandmother died when she was young and had young children. Her husband, my great-grandfather couldn't afford to raise the children and work whatever meager jobs he could find. So, my grandmother grew up in and out of a state-run children's home in Georgia. When he had a little money, her father would come take her for a time to live at home, but after a while she'd be back at the children's home. Move along, nothing to see here, just an orphan child who will hardly make it in the world. But she made it, my grandmother. She made it, grew up, became an elementary school teacher and life-long Sunday school teacher, met and married her high school sweetheart. They had 3 children, one of whom had me. You have a story like that, too.

Jenny's great-grandmother was a child when her parents immigrated to America from Sweden. They made their way to northern Minnesota, and through, we think, the Homestead Act acquired rights to land wrapping around a small, isolated lake. By the time they arrived, a single Native American man lived on the land, his family all gone. With him, they shared the land and looked after one another. Then in a farm accident, the father died. The Native American man looked after the family. He brought them game. They gave him supplies. It was this way until he died. Jenny's grandmother remembers him when she was a young child growing up there, walking across the frozen lake to school and back on those cold winter days. What will this girl become growing up way out there in the wilderness with a life like that? Well, she made it, too. She grew up, trapped and cleaned animals, was named the first homecoming queen of their

little high school, married a football coach, had 5 children, one of whom had Jenny. You have a story like that, too. We all have grandma stories whether we know them or not.

Today on All Saints Day we remember those kinds of stories of those kinds of people. Some are remarkable stories of remarkable people, like the stories of the saints the church recognizes as exemplary Christian lives. Others are just plain ol' making-it-in-the-world kind of stories. The world is full of both, full of grit and grace and wonderful stories. As we honor Joice Franklin at the end of our service today, we remember a life lived with a lot of ordinary days and a whole lot of magnificent ones, a story of grit and grace and the people who she loved and who loved her.

Maybe they said that about Joice, too, the day she arrived, a farm girl from the Midwest, standing on the shores of Papua New Guinea with big dreams and a big heart. Maybe they whispered, she's not gonna make it there. But don't count her out. She has God, she has grit and grace, and she has Karl, too. And that's a lot. Don't count Ruth and Naomi out just yet, either. If you think they're done for, you'd be so very wrong. You'd be overlooking, discounting, ignoring three things. Just three things, but three that mean everything. You'd be overlooking the grit of these two. Grit goes a long way when you're desperate. And you'd be overlooking the grace of God. God's grace goes a long way, too, much farther than you can imagine. And in overlooking both of those, you'd miss someone you'd like to meet. One person who changes the narrative. Boaz, the redeemer. Before I introduce Boaz, I want to be sure you know this story isn't of two helpless women rescued by a man who swoops in to save them. Boaz is important to the story, no doubt. He's a good man. But this is a story about the women: two widows, one elderly, the other a foreigner. It's a story of God in their lives. Only then is it a story of Boaz. Boaz is part of it, even if he drags his feet for a long time. Boy, sometimes you just gotta ask out the girl.

The book's title and the main character is Ruth, but Ruth's story can't be told without Boaz, just like all of our stories include the people who change our lives. Boaz changed Ruth's life and Naomi's too. Soon after they arrive with bellies empty, Ruth says she's going to find a field to glean. Gleaners cleaned up fallen grains after the workers came through harvesting. It was hard, lonely work with only the meager hope to pick up enough to make a loaf of bread for the day. It was also dangerous work for a young, immigrant, poor woman. Working men were all over the fields and sometimes were not honorable in their passions.

Boaz, the field owner, noticed the young woman he'd not seen before and inquired about her. They told him she's the Moabite woman who came back with Naomi. Her husband died. She's all alone. Boaz had compassion for her. Her summoned her to his office, told her to stay in his field where she would be protected. The working men were told not to touch her. The men were also told to let more than the usual amount happen to fall to the ground for gleaning. And if she's thirsty, she can come drink from the well with the workers.

She was saved. In the crisis of hunger, loneliness, poverty, and hopelessness, she was shown what: what do we call this? Hospitality to the stranger? Certainly, but doesn't that seem a little cold to call it that. What else? Compassion. Surely, compassion. Boaz had compassion on her. Protected her. Gave her what she needed when she needed it. I don't know, though. It seems

to go beyond compassion, which can seem a little patriarchal when it's a person in power extending it to a person who is powerless. It looks like love. This looks like love, and not even romantic love, yet, though we'll get to that, just love. The love of a person whose heart and resources go toward someone else just for love. Don't we need some of that in the world? Love from God which pours lavishly on us through the full heart of someone else. I think that's it. I think this is love, and I think Boaz loves her like God loves us. No wonder he's called a redeemer.

A redeemer in ancient Israel was a next-of-kin male who has the privilege and responsibility to marry the widow of his deceased kin. So much of the cultural scaffolding of this is far lost to us, but you get the idea. A redeemer acts on behalf of someone who was in trouble, danger, or need. The redeemer rescues, redeems, vindicates the vulnerable at their most vulnerable. There are many appeals in the Old Testament to God as rescuer of the weak and the needy. ([Psalm 82:4](#); [Daniel 6:27](#); [Jeremiah 20:13](#)). In a similar way in the New Testament, Christ is considered a redeemer because in our great need, he is the one who can help. Like Ruth, we are needy, and no matter how much grit we may have, we are in need of grace from one who loves us. As our redeemer, Christ does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

I don't think Boaz is a reluctant redeemer, but he's an awfully shy one. You'd think Boaz would follow up his compassion on Ruth with flowers or chocolates or an invitation to dinner, but you know, he's working. He has a lot on his mind there at harvest season. But mostly, it's because he doesn't think he has a chance with her. He sees himself as Frederick Buechner puts it "as an old crock around so many young bucks in their tight-fitting jeans." Ruth makes it clear enough eventually, that she picks Boaz. In Ruth's advance toward Boaz, she identifies him as the agent of God's provision, saying, "Spread your wings over your servant for you are a redeemer." In another cultural scene whose meaning is long lost to us, Ruth essentially proposes to him, you big lug. Boaz just about trips over his uncovered feet with this good fortune.

Boaz and Ruth marry, and they have a child, a son.

If the story ended right there, it would be a marvelous fairy tale story, rags to riches, lost to found, hopeless to hopeful, darkness to light, death to new life. That would be enough as a parable of Israel's life in slavery in Egypt and homecoming to the promised land, a parable of Israel in exile in Babylon and then return. It would be a parable of our life under God's wings, under God's redemptive love and grace.

But that's not the end of the story. Just when you thought Naomi and Ruth had come to the end of their story, grit and grace have other plans for a future and a life. Just when you think this little book in the Bible has done all its work, there's something more. Just a footnote at the end of the story which returns us to our question: how much do you know about your grandmother?

Because the son of Boaz and Ruth was named Obed, who grew up and became the father of Jesse, who grew up and became the father of David, who grew up and became the king of Israel. If you blink, you'll miss it, but when you open the first page of the New Testament and read the names of the ancestors of Jesus, alongside Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Judah, David

and Solomon, those towering patriarchs, you'll find the name of a grandmother who had been widowed, poor, hungry, and brave; a woman full of grit and grace; an immigrant named Ruth.

Hail to our grandmothers of grit and grace and to all who love them and are dearly loved by them. And honor to our God in whom dead ends are never dead, and the end is often just the beginning of something amazing, something eternal, because our redeemer, Jesus Christ, lives.

Amen.

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