Scripture: Ruth 2:17-20 23 (NRSVUE)

So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. **18** She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. **19** Her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.” So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, saying, “The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz.” **20** Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Blessed be he by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” Naomi also said to her, “The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.”

23 So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests, and she lived with her mother-in-law.

Sermon: When We Make Room

Our scriptures today focused on the introduction and interaction of Boaz. In walks Boaz. Chapter 2 begins in verse one by introducing Boaz as a prominent man connected to Naomi’s deceased husband, Elimelech. And friends, that is where I first got caught. Translations, as you know, can get really tricky. Up until this week, when preaching or teaching about Ruth, I always thought that Boaz was like a cousin or a 3rd-cousin-twice-removed kind of relative to Elimelech. When we look strictly at the Hebrew translation, however, there is greater vagueness, which is believed to create suspense in the story. The Hebrew translates the narrator's words to Elimelech’s acquaintance, close friend, or companion. Remember, written text wasn’t the way to share stories for the ancient Middle East. Stories were told orally, and second- or third-hand writers were the ones to write them down. So, when it came to writing Ruth’s story down, the word was changed to “kinsman,” which could mean a blood relative or simply a person of the same ethnicity. So, as we think about this encounter more, I want us to keep the relationship among Elimelech, Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth more open.

Whoever Boaz was to Naomi, he was brought into the story because of his prominence. Now, many scholars have worked to figure out what it meant for Boaz to be “worthy” or prominent. Some believe it was because of the strength

or power he held in Bethlehem. Others just thought of him as prominent because he owned property. But there is something even more important that makes Boaz prominent.

When Naomi, towards the end of our scripture today, recognized the name Boaz and named him as “one of our nearest kin”, she was referring to someone who was a kinsman-redeemer. Here’s what that means and why that matters. When Naomi and her family left Bethlehem, they most likely leased or temporarily disposed of their land to someone else. When Elimelech died, it would have been transferred to that other person. Boaz, under Israelite law codes, was the designated person who had the responsibility of recovering or buying back the land since it was removed because of a death in the family. Israelite law allowed that to happen. Can we see now why Boaz was as significant as he was portrayed? But it doesn’t end there.

Boaz’s interaction with Ruth is one of great significance as well. Hospitality codes were also part of what Israelites were expected to do, ever since the days of Abraham and the strangers who told him and his wife they would become pregnant. Yet we are reminded, yet again, by Ruth herself that she is not part of that culture. Technically, Boaz didn’t have to keep the hospitality custom with her. Instead, however, he saw Ruth’s connection, or maybe just had compassion for another human being and took a step towards mercy.

In the Israelite code (not so much the law in and of itself), people were expected to follow God's directions in what is now known as the book of Leviticus. These laws forbade Israelite landowners from gathering all their crops. Instead, they were to leave some crops at the edge of their field for the poor and “resident alien” who had no land of their own. In the book of Deuteronomy, we can see that people were also instructed within that law to let the orphan and widow gather from their crops. This was known as gleaning. Not only did Boaz give Ruth half a bushel’s worth of grain, but he also fed her lunch during her gleaning. Something special was in the works.

But since this story is ultimately about Naomi, we would be remiss not to include the implications for her in our conversation today. Even though Naomi is clearly a sidelined character in this chapter of the story, there are some

important pieces within her words. In fact, there is quite the character development of Naomi just within the little conversation we see of her. There is a hope that Naomi saw in the meeting of Ruth and Boaz. The joy that shines through as Naomi realizes her blessing. Possibilities were still possible. Naomi either believed that Boaz's recognition of Ruth proved that Boaz had not "forsaken" either them or their deceased husbands, or the words may mean that Boaz's actions indicated that the Lord had not "forsaken" them. Her spirits began to lift.

Frankly, all this has me wondering a myriad of questions:

- Who are we called to be the kinsman-redeemer for?
- Who has God placed in our lives to protect?
- Do we give people pious words in response to their pleas instead of material relief for their needs?
- Do we allow those without resources of their own to "glean" only after we have taken everything we want from our "fields"?
- Are we reluctant to set aside perfectly good resources for others to use, telling ourselves that they have not helped to "grow" or to "tend" them?

Or it may lead us to ask questions like:

- Who is "family, and who is not?
- What are the rights, the privileges, and the obligations shared by those who belong to the "insider" group?
- How does an outsider become an insider?

Ruth could have married into Elimelech's family (Boaz) or simply received mercy from a family acquaintance. Either way, mercy was given, room was made, and can still be made.

Sometimes home is lost… whether for us or for others. When it happens, we are given the opportunity to make room. Make room to care for others. Make room for new possibilities of the Holy Spirit's work. Make room for God's hope and love to shine through. Let us make room and love on our fellow humanity. Amen.