

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Ruth 2:1-23
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Making Room for the Other

I want to share a few stories from a book that has helped shape my thinking for this sermon series, Feast. It's called *A Meal with Jesus, Discovering Grace, Community, & Mission Around the Table*. The author, Tim Chester, is a pastor in the UK who, like me, happens to believe that meal times are one of the primary missional moments where Jesus shows up, knits hearts together, and calls people to follow him.

Tim describes how one of their missional communities wanted to celebrate the Kurdish New Year by throwing a party. So they provided kebabs and live music. Over one hundred Kurds from across the city showed up. Their main worry... was whether or not the flexing floor boards would hold up as the Kurdish men danced in sync. The party ended by sharing the reason they put on this event... to express God's love for Kurds.

Another story involved Tim's wife inviting a work colleague over to their house for their family's Saturday evening routine of take out food and watching the UK version of "American Idol." This person described Tim's home as a place of "refuge" for her. Some weeks later this woman started reading the Bible with Tim and his wife.

One last story is of a couple who held a barbecue with some friends involving two Christian couples from their church and two unbelieving couples. They enjoyed a pot-luck... there is that holy word... of hamburgers, marinated chicken, potato salad, and a plum cake. Conversations about politics, soccer, work, food, and faith flowed.

Tim writes "These are all forms of mission Jesus would recognize. They are the kinds of events he might have attended. The Son of Man came eating and drinking.

But they are also ways of doing mission that [each of us] could do. In one sense none of these meals is anything special. They don't require any special training or a course in apologetics or a grasp of the latest missional jargon. When [we] combine a passion for Jesus with shared meals, [we] create potential gospel opportunities."¹

The latest edition of *Presbyterian Today* shared statistics that 85% of people come to church for the first time because they were invited by a friend while only

¹ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus, Discovering Grace, Community, & Mission Around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 75-77.

2% came because of marketing or advertising. What does that tell us? We need to have more missional meals. We need to make room for others at our tables. We need to share our love of Jesus with people. Because our personal interaction with those outside the faith is the primary means through which Jesus reaches out with his Good News.

The scripture story we are going to focus on today is from Ruth 2:1-23. It is missional through and through though Jesus is never mentioned...because he hadn't been born yet. These are Jesus' ancestors. But we see how Boaz, makes room at his family table for a homeless foreigner and her destitute mother-in-law.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

A woman was making fried eggs for her husband. Suddenly, her husband burst into the kitchen. "Careful," he said, "CAREFUL! Put in more butter! Oh my Gosh! You're cooking too many at once. TOO MANY! Turn them! TURN THEM NOW! We need more butter. Oh my Gosh! WHERE are we going to get MORE BUTTER? They're going to STICK! Careful. CAREFUL! I said be CAREFUL! You NEVER listen to me when you're cooking! Never! Turn them! Hurry up! Are you CRAZY? Have you LOST your mind? Don't forget to salt them. You know you always forget to salt them. Use the salt. USE THE SALT! THE SALT!"

The wife stared at him. "What in the world is wrong with you? You think I don't know how to fry a couple of eggs?"

The husband calmly replied, "I just wanted to show you what it feels like when I'm driving."

I'm pulling out the best of my jokes this series for us to feast on!

I love this story of Boaz and Ruth because it paints such a beautiful picture of what the church could become. Not only does it showcase the tender devotion of a woman toward her mother-in-law, but it also provides numerous examples of Godly hospitality and how we can make room for others at our tables.

Boaz' interaction with Ruth, the foreigner, exposes his heart. He has a good heart. We see this by the way he interacts with the workers in his field. He loves them. He takes care of them. He shows good will toward them. Though he is superior to them, we don't get a sense of that hierarchy at play. He treats them as he would want to be treated. As one of his own family.

I imagine Boaz whistling as he returned home from town and cheerfully greeting his workers in the field. "It's a great day my friends. The Lord be with you!"

To which they respond, "And also with you Boaz!"

Neither they nor Ruth are problems for Boaz to have deal with. They are people created in God's image, just as he is.

Boaz is observant and attentive. He notices Ruth. One who was different from the rest. The outcast. The new person in their midst. The foreigner. Are we observant of what is going on in our church? Do we notice those who are new and try to make them feel at home? Boaz is an example for us all.

What he notices is that Ruth is not causing problems for anyone. She's just trying to provide for her family. Boaz' land clearly can support her following behind Boaz's harvesters and gleaning as commanded by the Old Testament Law.

Boaz also listened to what people were saying about Ruth. Her reputation for sticking with her mother-in-law through thick and thin preceded her. He had obviously heard of this stranger coming into town and of the many sacrifices she had made to help her family have a better life.

Boaz has a healthy theology of left overs.

The Lord said in Leviticus, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings from your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the alien. I am the Lord your God."²

In Deuteronomy the Lord said, "When you are harvesting in your field and overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this."³

Perhaps Boaz remembered back when he had been shown this same kindness during a time of scarcity in his own life. My friends, when we receive hospitality and kindness by someone who invited us to be part of their family during a time that we needed it most, we remember those moments. And that compels us to share that same kindness with other people.

This story is about living out a theology of left overs and how God works to bless others through the abundance he provides.

Boaz protects Ruth. Without connection to a male provider, Ruth's social status in the field was tenuous at best. Boaz told his men not to touch her while working in the field nor to embarrass or rebuke her should she wander beyond the typical gleaning boundaries. Going a step further, Boaz says "Rather, pull out

² Leviticus 19:9-10; 23-22

³ Deuteronomy 24:19-21

some stalks from the good bundles you've harvested and leave them for her to pick up for herself.”

Boaz engages Ruth. He certainly didn't have to. He had fulfilled his Levitical obligation to provide for this widow and her mother-in-law. But he takes a step further yet. He treats her like a human. He talks with her. Interacts with her. Not only that but goes out of his way to ensure that she is treated like any other of his hired workers. With dignity and respect.

Tim Chester writes, “Often we maintain significant boundaries when offering help to persons in need. Many churches prepare and serve meals to hungry neighbors, but few church members find it easy to sit and eat with those who need the meal. When people are very different from ourselves, we often find it more comfortable to cook and clean for them than to share a meal and conversation. We are familiar with roles as helpers but are less certain about being equals eating together. Many of us struggle with simply being present with people in need; our helping roles give definition to the relationship but they also keep it decidedly hierarchical.”⁴

A couple weeks ago when I was serving at the Winter Housing Overflow Family Shelter, I met a middle school student who was staying there with their family. They asked if it would be ok to play basketball in the gym before going to bed. Now I could have just given them a ball and sent them on their way. But instead I felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit say, “Chris, grab a ball and play with them.” While our time wasn't sharing food, shooting hoops together created a space where we could interact in ways where we were equals.

Two people playing basketball together, one just happened to be homeless and the other a shelter helper, but it was clearly unhierarchical.

Boaz sets an ordinary table where Ruth feels included, wanted, and cherished. Boaz invites Ruth into his family's normal mealtime routine. This is not something special or set apart.

Again Tim Chester writes, “It's good to be reminded that the table is a very ordinary place, a place so routine and everyday it's easily overlooked as a place of ministry. And this business of hospitality that lies at the heart of Christian mission, it's a very ordinary thing, it's not rocket science nor is it terribly glamorous. Yet it is the very ordinariness of the table and the ministry we exercise there that renders these elements of Christian life so important to the mission of the church. . . Most of what you do as a community of hospitality will go unnoticed and unrecognized. At base, hospitality is about providing a space for God's Spirit to move. Setting a table, cooking a meal, washing the dishes is the ministry of facilitation: providing a context in which people feel loved and welcomed and where God's Spirit can be at

⁴ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 82.

work in their lives. Hospitality is a very ordinary business, but in its ordinariness is its real worth.”⁵

Boaz provides for Ruth and Naomi. He sends Ruth home with a full belly and an ephah of threshed barley which is about 3/5 of a bushel or 22 liters. An unusually large amount of barley that would have typically been gleaned in one day.

And finally we see that Boaz is God’s representative in Ruth’s life, a minister of healing and grace. But guess what, he isn’t even a priest. He’s an ordinary lay person through whom God works, not a professional.

Notice how Ruth is drawn into Boaz’ kindness. He removes any walls or barriers that might have separated them. She feels completely at home to be herself. Bridges are built between the two. They become family.

So what does all of this mean for us in the church?

Our interaction with foreigners actually exposes our heart. Tim Chester says, “Problem people, difficult people, different people have a habit of exposing our hearts.”⁶ Isn’t that so true? When I experience difficult people, I don’t think I like at time what I learn about myself.

But what we do learn is that “the meal table is an opportunity to give up our proud ideals by which we judge others and accept in their place the real community created by the cross of Christ, with all its brokenness.”⁷ We also see that “The marginalized cease to be marginal when they’re included around a meal table.”⁸

We learn that we need to be observant and attentive of what is going on in the community around us. Paying attention to those God moments when we are invited to be part of something that God is doing in our world.

We need to develop a theology of left overs. Perhaps that means when we host guests, make more food than is necessary and send them home at the end of the evening with generous portions that could last at least another meal’s worth.

We need create spaces where people feel protected and safe.

We need to engage our guests, not just do the physical act of service, but ask them questions about their lives. What are their hopes and dreams? Highs and lows? Bucket lists? How did couples meet?

We need to create simple meals where people feel wanted, included, and cherished. Let’s not stress about what we will eat but stead focus on how we will

⁵ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus*, 90-91.

⁶ Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus, Discovering Grace, Community & Mission around the Table* (Wheaton, IL: Crossways, 2011), 45.

⁷ IBID, 48.

⁸ IBID, 49.

eat together. Invite people into the meal preparation or planning. Potlucks are great because no one person carries the burden of providing the entire meal.

We need to provide for the orphans and widows in our midst. The most vulnerable among us. Look after them. Let them know that they are not alone.

We need to be God's agents of healing and grace in other people's lives.

If we do these things, I believe with my whole heart that we will create spaces where believer and non-believer will want to be part. And Jesus will be made known in ways that we have no idea.

By the way, what was Boaz before he met Ruth? Ruthless!

Let's pray. Amen!