

So this morning we come again to the book of Ruth, the second chapter. And last week we looked at chapter one together in its entirety, and it is one that is quite different and distinct from chapter two because in many ways we learn so much about what is going on in Naomi and Ruth's life with a very quick pace. That pace changes in chapter two, and what we have before us is what takes place on one given day. And we come to Ruth chapter two, verses one through twelve knowing that at the end of chapter one Ruth and Naomi have now returned to Bethlehem, and Naomi's story has gone viral among those who knew her. She doesn't look anything like she used to. She is in mourning. She's in deep pain. She's changed her name--one from sweetness to now bitterness. She's wondering what God is doing, where is the Lord. Ruth, her daughter-in-law, chose not to go back--one of her two daughters-in-law chose not to go back to her home in Moab, but rather would travel back to Bethlehem with her, committing herself to Naomi in a very profound commitment and a vow that she made that if she does not fulfill it, if she is unfaithful, that the Lord would deal with her severely and harshly. Well, now they're back. And the question is now, "Now what?" What does life look like? What it looks like is refuge--that they find refuge in the most unlikely of places, through the most unlikely of means. Now again, if you're familiar with the book of Ruth, I would encourage you to go back again, read slowly, don't rush to chapter three and chapter four, because there's a lot of life in these two chapters which is easy for us to sort of just get through.

So let's turn here then to Ruth chapter two to see the refuge. "Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor." Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech. Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!" "The LORD bless you!" they called back. Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?" The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter." So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled." At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?" Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me this morning. Come, Holy Spirit, come and fill our minds and our hearts and our souls with the great grace that is your refuge. And how and in what ways you would take this word to form in us the very things you were forming in Ruth and in Boaz. Meet us, Lord, where we are and wherever we come from, that we might see your refuge. In Jesus' name, amen.

So I want to say by way of apology that you don't see an outline in your bulletin. I have an outline, but the snowstorm was supposed to happen, and so I gave them my text and my title on Tuesday. On Wednesday we had a snow day that sort of wasn't a snow day, I guess, and then on Thursday I took a day of vacation, so I had no outline prepared for the bulletin, so my apology. So I have an outline for you now, so if you have your pens, here's the outline. It's only two points. Yes, a Presbyterian minister is doing more than just two points, that's all we're doing. So, two points. They are: Character Matters and Ground Zero. Character Matters and Ground Zero. Because in this chapter we see the ways in which God-wrought, fueled, informed character comes out of these two lives of Ruth and Boaz. That gives us instruction. But then it also takes us and does so in the midst of the Ground Zero of these women's lives.

So let's look together, then, at this chapter. Character Matters. We largely have two characters in chapter two. Naomi is certainly present in the first part of the chapter. Ruth goes straight to her, doesn't ask for her permission, she says, look, I'm going to go work. So we are then given to Ruth, by and large, and then her coming into contact with Boaz, and we

see Boaz's life, and Naomi comes at the end. But I think principally the two characters that rise to the surface for us, that the holy Scriptures are given to us to contemplate, is look at these two lives--look at what God is doing in these two people. And it happens in a very unlikely way. So let's look at it together. First, Ruth. We can look at these verses, and we're going to see what God is doing, that he is doing by extension of what happened or what we heard about in chapter one. For in chapter one we hear Ruth, who was given the opportunity to go back to Moab, and certainly Orpah did so, but Ruth chose not to. And we're reminded in chapter two that Ruth in some ways out-Jobs Job, and she sort of outdoes Naomi, and that she--at least Naomi's going back to a people that she knew, she knew Bethlehem. They knew her. Ruth didn't. But Ruth says, after being with Naomi for ten years, certainly having seen their worship of the God of Israel, hearing about the promises of Jehovah, the covenant God of Israel, she was convinced. Instead of going back to the gods of her family and of Moab, she turns to Naomi and says, your people be my people, your God will be my God. Where you live, I will live; where you die, I will die. Now for us, in such a simple statement, it's easy to sort of gloss over and say, well, she was just giving a commitment, she's being a caregiver. But it's so much more than that because we have to understand she's going [back] to a foreign land as a Moabitess, to Israel as an outsider, as a Gentile, as a woman without a husband and without children. There is no way that someone would take this turn of events without seeing that underneath her commitment to Naomi of saying your God will be my God, in seeing in that that God had done something in Ruth. He was working out biblical faith. And we see what that working out of biblical faith looks like in chapter two. So as we look at her life, let's look at verse seven first. Verse seven tells us after she's told Naomi what she wants to do, we learn--in verse six, rather. First, we note by way of the foreman's story that Ruth came to him who is the head honcho of the harvesters belonging to Boaz, and boldly asks him, can I follow along after the harvesters to pick up grain. And we also note that the very fact that she asks Naomi, she said, look I am I'm going to the fields to glean, shows us that what is working out in Ruth is a very courageous, bold character. It's courageous because a woman at this time, regardless of her standing, going into a field to harvest grain was a dangerous choice to make. Women were vulnerable to the advances and to the attacks of men, and here she is, not even belonging to the household of Boaz, not even one of his servant girls. She goes and she boldly asks, look, I don't even want to be where the gleaners are, I want to be behind the harvesters. Now let's try to make sense of that request and how bold it is. Here's how it worked. How it worked is, if you owned a field and you were growing grain, then what you would have is a group of harvesters, men, who would go along, hold stalks and with their--take it and cut it down, and then they would take those groups of stalks in their hands and lay them on the ground. And behind those harvesters would be a group of women who were servant girls, paid for and paid by the owner of the field, who would then go and take those sheaves, wrap them up together, tie them, and then carry them. Then and only then could gleaners--gleaners were people who could not provide for themselves, they were not wealthy enough, they were not paid by anyone, they were simply picking up the scraps--so gleaners would come along and pick up off the ground whatever shook off through the process of cutting down the stalks, and then whatever was left over by those picking them up. Here Ruth, a Moabitess, courageous going into a field, knowing that she would be vulnerable, goes up to the foreman and says, look, I don't even want to be where the gleaners are, I want to walk behind the harvesters. The faith that God had worked in Ruth is now coming out in her character with a woman who was very courageous and very bold. She was willing to put herself in a situation that was precarious for what purpose? To care for Naomi. In many ways, by her simple request, her bold request, she wasn't satisfied with simply picking up the scraps. She wanted to get the best that she could possibly get for Naomi. Now that's just in verse six.

We also see, verse ten, that despite her boldness and her courageousness, watch what her response is when Boaz compliments her by providing more for her. When he promises to give her something and even more than what she was looking for, at this, verse ten tells us, that she bowed down with her face to the ground and she exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me--a foreigner." Though she is courageous and bold in wanting to provide the best that she can for Naomi, there doesn't seem to be an ounce of presumptuousness. She's taken the place of humility--even in her boldness she recognizes she's taking a risk and she's at the mercy of this man that she doesn't even know, and this man, who's showing her favor, instead of just saying, well, thank you very much, I'm providing for Naomi, you know my story. She's humbled that he even knows her story. And that's what biblical faith looks like. It's one that brings out a courageous boldness in the provision for others, but it does so without a presumptuousness and an arrogance. She's humbled to the ground.

But then also look at verse seventeen, which if you have your Bibles, you'll see. If you didn't bring it, I'll simply read it where it says, "So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it

amounted to an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.” What it tells us is a couple of things. Just how incredibly hard-working this woman is. It would've been enough, it would have been purely living up to expectations, had a gleaner simply stayed till the sun goes down, but then quickly go on her way. But we know through the testimony of the foreman and through the testimony of what we learn about her in verse seventeen and following, is that Ruth worked from the earliest moment, took very little break, and worked till evening, after, by the way, she's already received a special meal at the hand of Boaz. She continues to work to make sure she's doing what—she's not only hard-working, she's hard-working not for herself. Biblical faith works out and against self-centeredness and selfishness and works out in other-centeredness. Ruth is showing us what a selfless biblical character looks like. She worked hard to the end of the day to get the best that she could, not just for herself. But obviously the amount, the amount that we are given here, would have been far more, multiple times more than any gleaner following behind the servant girls would've ever gathered. She didn't just get enough. She is blessing Naomi with the grace of her hard work to the point that Naomi's cup is full to overflowing. A selfless, bold, humble character. It is a beautiful thing to behold. It is a humbling thing to read. But it's there for us. It's there as a testimony of what God intends to do in our lives. As we come into contact with the living God, it's not enough that God simply tells us, okay, follow my rules, and so we try to be moral, good, religious people. He actually means to make us more than moral and religious. He means to make us completely and utterly new from the inside out.

But God is also doing something not just in Ruth, he's doing something in Boaz. Let's look at Boaz, whose name, by the way, means 'in his strength.' Is it any surprise, then, that God uses what the name Boaz means and works out what biblical, male, masculine character looks like. Watch. Verse four. So easy for us to pass over it. Boaz, coming from Bethlehem, comes out to the fields, and he greets the harvesters in his field, and he says, the LORD be with you. And they respond, the LORD bless you. Again, it's very easy for us to pass over it, but every word in the Scriptures are not wasted. It is there for us to tell us of the kind of faith that God had worked out in Boaz. It would have been perfectly acceptable, considered righteous, for a man who owns a field to simply come to it and say, what do you have for me. Where's the produce. Where's the success. But the Scriptures tell us that the first words out of his mouth before he has any report of how it's going, he says, the LORD--as we've look at before, Jehovah, Yahweh-- be with you--the covenant-keeping, gracious, loving God of the Israelites be with you. That is a man who does not see his position as something to leverage self-worth from; he saw it as an opportunity to bless others. Then in verses eight through nine, notice what it says. So Boaz said to Ruth, after he's gotten this instruction from his foreman as to who she is and what she's doing, he says, “My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.” What I want to tell you is, many times, many commentators have talked about it, I know about the books, and I've even heard sermons to the point that want to give us the impression that Boaz comes to his field, looks out there in the morning, looking at the grain, and he sees this pretty young woman and he says, who's that? As if his question to his foreman is born out of romantic attraction. But I want to tell you there's not a shred of evidence of that in the text. What there is in the text, is it shows us that this man who has biblical faith that is working out in him the desire to bless those who work for him looks out into the field, not with romantic eyes, but with the eyes of a shepherd. And he sees this woman, he's told of her story. She is a foreigner to the Israelites. She's been faithful to her mother-in-law. And yet in that moment. I want every man here to see, without a shred of evidence of any romance whatsoever, this man looks at this woman and sees not some weak, vulnerable person--he sees a strong, bold, courageous woman yet who's in a situation that could be vulnerable. And he looks at her, who does not belong to him, and he says, but I see you, and I want to make sure that no one touches you. Do you know that the mere fact, the mere presence of him saying, I've told that no man should touch you, gives us an inclination that perhaps that was common? That it may have then been completely acceptable for men to touch women in the field and use them at their own expense? But rather Boaz looks out and says, look, here's what I want you do to. He doesn't just permit her to be in the field, he promotes her. He says, follow the harvesters. And then he looks at her with a shepherd's heart, shepherd's eyes, shepherd desire, shepherd vision and says, listen, I'm not just permitting you, I want to promote you, and I'm going to make sure that you have water to drink. Water to drink that would have never been used by anyone who gleaned, scarcely even the servant girls. He was giving her access to water that was really only meant for the harvesters, the men. That's a shepherd's heart. And that's what biblical faith works out in men.

I was using this as a sermon illustration yesterday. I didn't use this in the first service, so there you go, I'm going to use it here. Yesterday in the wedding service. So many men who are of my generation have really gotten into these extreme challenge weekends called "Tough Mudder" and "Warrior Dash"--and maybe some of you done that. I've even wanted to do it. Some of you are laughing. Yeah, I see who you are, you've done it. Okay, so why do so many men in my generation—why do so many of us want to do it. It's because we want an extreme challenge, that somewhere we've learned that it's a little less masculine just to be in our cubicle and push paper. So what we need to do is to get out there with our headbands, crawl in cold mud under electrified wire, jump into dumpsters of cold, ice, neon green water, run twelve miles, climb a ten foot wall, get to the end bloody, bruised, and swollen and go, "Now that's a man." They go back to work, and as I've read the articles, the guys who started it--who are Wall Streeters, by the way--go back to their office on Monday morning and they're looking around at all the schleps they work next to, "Heh, what'd you do this weekend?" That's what is becoming a tag for masculinity in our culture. That is foreign to biblical faith. Fine, if you want to go do all that stuff, but don't confuse it with masculinity. Biblical faith works in the heart of a man to see women not as something that they get something from, but as an opportunity to bless. Not as an opportunity to exploit, but someone to come along side and to work with, to encourage, to promote, to build up. That is biblical masculinity. And if we as men want to know how we get this kind of masculinity, it is only possible, only possible, is if we as men go counter-culturally, and instead of putting our fists up and putting our hands in our pockets, getting on the couch and watching a hockey game, and getting bro-hugs and braggadocios attitudes-- biblical masculinity, I think, begins by getting on our knees before the ultimate masculine figure, which is Jesus Christ. And saying, Lord, I want to prove my masculinity to the world, but you told me you want to do something else. You want to work out something very different. You want to work out integrity. You want to work out faithfulness. You want to work out a shepherd's heart that looks to give, not to get. That is not natural to us, at all, and our culture knows it and it's providing an alternative.

But let us be careful. What we also see here, in verse fourteen we learn of this: He says to her in verse fourteen, "At mealtime Boaz said to her, [Ruth], 'Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.'" So he calls her over to the table which would've only been meant for harvesters and the owner of the field, and he says, here's the bread, dip it in some wine, and take it for yourself. Then "When she sat down with the harvesters"--yet another sign of just how unusual Boaz is, allows her to sit at the table—"he offered her some roasted grain and she ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, 'Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her.'" He feeds her twice and then he sets up a context in which she can have dignity and honor as a fellow heir of the covenant of God in the people of Israel. What a beautiful picture. He is feeding her. It was the other way around. But God is giving us this story to say that biblical faith takes men and runs countercultural. It's an incredible thing if we're looking for it.

But one final, and just know, it was completely okay for a man of this time to have been an Israelite man, to be religious faithful, righteous, and respectable to have a field and only allow the corners of the field to be used by those who came and had need--the gleaners--or to allow another small strip along the edge of the field to pick up their grain that they needed only after he and his harvesters had come through to pick the best. But do you notice Boaz doesn't just give the corners. He's not just giving the edge. Biblical faith worked out in him a generosity, and he puts her in the middle of the action where the best grain can be had. That tells us not just of his heart of shepherding for this particular woman, it tells us about a heart that has been grasped and molded by the God who is generous and gracious and loving. And when he says, LORD be with you, it's not just a religious phrase. That this is a man who has received the peace of God, who's been changed by the love of this covenant-keeping, faithful God, but has not kept it for himself. He's giving it away. Ladies and gentlemen, men and women, boys and girls, whether you're in Pioneer Girls or CSB, whether you're in a women's Bible study or an all-men's accountability group, regardless of where you are, men and women, we need to know that what God means to do is to not merely make us a moral, righteous people--he intends to work out the gospel of grace to the covenant-keeping God, to work out in us from the inside biblical character that then works out into faithfulness boldness, courage, humility, generosity, shepherd's heart. You see, it's sounding a lot like the fruit of the Spirit, you see. You see, what I see echoed in the character that God is working out in these two folks in the Old Testament is very much pointing to what Jesus wants to do in the Sermon on the Mount, what Paul is talking about of the fruit of the Spirit. It's what C.S. Lewis said: God means to make us not a nice people but a new people. I've been struck by this from one of the authors that I read now and again, Henry Nouwen, as he looked at his own life and he saw how often his character, his person, is more formed by the culture than it is through Jesus Christ. And that character is

more and more being formed by the musts, the ought's, the should's of his daily schedule. E-mails need to be sent, meetings need to be attended to, people need to be visited, and all of these things. Yet he gets to the end of the day--he thinks about all of his words that he has said, all the activities, and he's asked himself, did I need to say those words, did I need to do those actions? And very subtly what he begins to see in his own heart, that I think is in the heart and character of all of us by nature, is that anger and pride well up to the top. And we've often heard it said that you are who you really are when no one else can see. The Bible also tells us that we see who you are when things happen in an unexpected way and how you respond. That's a frightening thing, but I see in Boaz, I see in Ruth, coming up against things they could not have planned, but watch what God does through their character. That's a convicting thought, because some of you tomorrow morning, perhaps later today, you'll going to get an e-mail from one of your bosses or your colleagues or a friend that's going to berate you, look down on you, judge you, bemoan you--whatever it might be—you're going to have one of your children speak to you as if you're just one of them, and roll their eyes, turn their backs. Students, boys and girls, you're going to have people say horrible things about you at school, expect you to live up to their expectations, and you're going to feel the pressure. You're going to feel it coming on. You're going to feel the anger or the pride rise up and feel, how dare you. And then, pffft, off goes the e-mail in response. It's so easy. And yet this is so hopeful. Lord, our character is broken because our natures are broken because of sin. And I am tempted to be formed--my character to be formed--by the culture more than I am the cross. Will you come by your grace and form this in us. And I don't think it begins with something we need to do, I think it begins with something we need to receive. Isn't that what Boaz and Ruth had? Something they'd received? God's grace and love. And then it says, hallelujah, here's my life, let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee.

But the Lord is doing more even than character development from the inside out. Notice in what context he's doing it in. He's doing it in the midst of Ruth and Naomi's Ground Zero. As we talked about last week, their lives are devastated. And they don't know how the story is going to end. It's not that they look back and go, well, look it there, that's how. It's not a Cinderella story where there's a prince in the castle and they simply have to get to him. They don't know. All they know is their husbands are dead and they have no sons. Now what? And there's something about Ground Zero that teaches us and gives us hope as well. Two things. Their position and a prayer. The position. You see, this ground zero is an intersection between life and loss, suffering and tears, blood and sacrifice. Their lives are, as it were, puffed up, scarred, torn, feeling at a loss. There is no doubt in my mind were Ruth and Naomi to walk into the doors of this church many of us would say, I know a counselor you need to meet. Can you imagine the devastation that they might be experiencing? And we need to be careful that we don't just try to fly through this position that they're in. It's here for a reason. And I think it's because at ground zero, at the position where the intersection of our life, suffering and loss come together is something that is not meant to race through. There is something that God means to teach Ruth and Naomi in that place that they are not going to learn in any other place. There's something about the character of God that they will see. I was reminded of this, again by a writer whose name is Nicholas Wolterstorff—that's a long name—Wolterstorff. He's a German Christian philosopher whose son at age 25 died tragically as a result of a mountaineering accident. And he wrote a book called, *Lament for a Son*. And at the words that his son had passed away, he said the lights around him went dim as in the noon day sun everything seemed to go dark. And this is what he wrote. He says, "Lord, noon has darkened. As fast as they could say, he is dead, the light dimmed. And where are you in the darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I cannot find you. If I had never looked for you or looked but never found, I would not feel this pain of your absence. Or is it not your absence in which I dwell, but your elusive, troubling presence. It's nevertheless--it's so painful. Never again will he be able to sit at our table and join in a meal. All the rest of our lives we must live without him. Only our death can stop the pain of his death." This is a man who is writing about the loss of a son that is very much exactly where Ruth and Naomi are. This is the intersection where many of the psalms are written. Lord, have you turned your face away from me? Do you not hear my cries?

But there is a prayer in the midst of this intersection. And I want you to hear the prayer. The prayer comes from the lips of Boaz. It's in verse twelve. "May the LORD repay you for what you have done." He's speaking to Ruth and praying for her. He says, "May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." Do you hear what he's praying? If he had just prayed, may the Lord repay you for what you have done, may you be richly rewarded by the Lord, and stopped there, it would seem as though he is saying, may the Lord reward you for your faithfulness, for what you have done, Naomi [Ruth]. It would be so easy to stop there, as if what Ruth has done, rather, is somehow *quid pro quo* for God to bless her. But he doesn't stop there, he goes on and he says, "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you

have come to take refuge.” What he is saying there, it's not what Ruth has done first, it's the God who has given her refuge, under whose wings she has found faithfulness. She has found courageous love. She has found a goodness in the Lord. And it's under his wings that she finds refuge, and it's under those wings that Boaz prays for her to be blessed. It's what the Lord has done that is a prayer in the midst of her ground zero. Back to Nicholas Wolterstorff. In the midst of these questions that he asked, in the midst of the darkness, in the midst of this pain, he says these words that are surprising. He says, you have allowed--speaking to the Lord-- you have allowed the bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself. He writes that. Lord, explain yourself. But then he answers by saying this: We strain to hear, but instead of hearing an answer we catch sight of God himself, scraped and torn, Jesus Christ. Through our tears we see the tears of God. What Boaz prays for Ruth and by extension, Naomi, that in the midst of their ground zero, in the midst of their tears, may they see the God of refuge. And in this prayer and in this promise, in the midst of this ground zero I see echoes of what is to come--Jesus Christ, who gave of himself, who took the form of a servant, going to the point of death. In the midst of our ground zero, while we were yet his enemies, Christ died for us. In the midst of our sin and brokenness for which we could not actually bring reconciliation, God has walked. And he has prayed for us through Jesus Christ, who prayed for his disciples and prayed for us who would believe through the message of the apostles, that we would know the love of God in Jesus Christ, and that that love would unite us, that that love would characterize our fellowship, and that that we would have the sustaining grace to walk with him until he returns again. That is the Lord's prayer over you, just as Boaz prayed over Ruth, because only in the Lord's name and only in Christ, only in God of the covenant of grace, is the God of refuge and strength. And maybe it is most seen at the ground zero of our lives. Hear that today. And do not turn from this message and think, I need to work harder. No, stop and receive the love, for as the Scriptures tell us, his banner over us is love.

Let's pray. Lord, you are our refuge and our strength. Without you there is only darkness. But with you, we see the light of Christ who died for us--his pain in the midst of ours, his life, his wholeness, his integrity for our brokenness. Lord, help us to see that and receive it, and may you work out in us biblical character, the fruit of the Spirit--not for us, but for your glory, not for us, but for the world around us. We thank you that you are our refuge and our strength. In Jesus' name, amen.