

Daring to Act

By Glenn Brumbaugh

Desperate times call for desperate measures. That's a phrase I'm sure we've all heard and maybe even used on occasion. But what happens when we truly find ourselves living in "desperation?" How do we define what it means to be "desperate" and what measures will we resort to when we find ourselves in such dire straits?

How we define those terms and the ethics we use to limit our behavior and response to hardship is relative to our own life experiences. For example, if we grew up in a home with a reliable roof over our head and food on the table every day, what we consider to be hardship may look quite different from others who have had different experiences. From that perspective, being late on our rent, or putting off a utility bill for a month when money's tight may seem like desperate times and measures to us. But if your background is less stable, if you've never been able to count on a stable home life, what you consider to be hardship will look radically different, as well as what you define as acceptable measures in such times.

As we continue our reflection on Ruth's story this week, I think it's important to keep these concepts in the front of our minds, as well as who would be the intended readers for this story when it was written. Now from the narration and the story line to this point, it's been pretty well established that Naomi and Ruth were about as desperate as you could get in the culture of their time. As childless widows, they did not fit into the economic structure of that society in any

fashion that would provide them with food or shelter. On top of that, Ruth was a foreigner from a country that was not well thought of by the Judeans. In fact, the author goes to great lengths to point that out multiple times in every chapter. And up to this point, he has also continually highlighted the desperate situation they were in because they did not have husbands or children. So it wouldn't make sense that this story would be targeted to those in similar situations. They already know how desperate it is to be in that situation. It makes much more sense to assume that the audience for this story would be those who do fit into the normal system of being provided for. These would be people who don't know what it's like to find themselves completely abandoned without any resources, without a male provider to care for them. This audience would not understand how desperate that situation really is, and also they wouldn't realize how inadequate the accepted method of providing for those outside the system was. They would leave behind what's required of them to be gleaned, and move along with their lives. Yet, as we've become aware of through this story is that the age-old solution of leaving the gleaning for the outcasts did not solve the problem. One could not survive long-term on the little bit left behind from the harvest. The best you could hope for would be to eat well during the harvest, but then struggle through the rest of the year.

One of the things I love about the book of Ruth is the seamless way it moves us from identifying the desperate problem Naomi and Ruth face in the first chapter to showing us how to act when faced with the immediate need in front of us in chapter two, through the faithful actions of Boaz.

Now as we enter the scene in chapter three, we are dealing with two issues.

What do we do when we are faced with people in desperate situations who take desperate measures that go beyond our sense of ethics and propriety? How do we respond to those actions and provide a resolution to their desperate situation that's not just a temporary fix? Make no mistake, these are desperate measures that Ruth is resorting to. The plan concocted by Naomi is putting everything on the line in a bid to see a way out of their situation. There is real danger involved for Ruth.

The writer of Ruth intentionally uses very vague Hebrew words to describe what's going on. Words that can be interpreted in a variety of ways so that the reader is left to read between the lines but can never be absolutely sure what's really going down on the threshing floor. First of all, Ruth is to go out dressed to the hilt. In that culture, then as well as today sadly, for a woman to be unspoken for, and unaccompanied, especially at night, puts her at risk to be harassed and assaulted by men she may encounter. The next step of her plan is really putting everything on the line. She is to observe where Boaz lays down, and uncover his "feet", and see where it goes from there. This is where the vocabulary choice plays a big role. The word "margelot", translated as "feet" can literally mean any part of the lower body, and the verb translated as "uncover" can mean "to uncover" or "be uncovered." So between the vagueness of the vocabulary used, and the selective translation, we have this weird scene of her uncovering his feet, and laying next to them. It's up to us to read between the lines should we

choose, but we're intentionally and literally kept in the dark as to exactly what transpired.

What is clear, however, is she is risking her reputation and possibly her freedom by making herself vulnerable and subject to the ethics and judgment of Boaz. As an unspoken-for foreigner, she has no standing or legal protection. Nothing would prevent her from being accused of prostitution or trespass, and suffering even further. Yet she is so desperate that she is willing to risk all of that to find a way out of her dilemma. And she is fortunate that Boaz sees her desperation, and offers to make her a legitimate, cared-for member of that society. He doesn't just send her off with a temporary fix with a bag of grain, he agrees to step up to the plate, and go to bat for her to make sure she has a permanent resolution to her problem.

The readers of this story would have known how inappropriate her actions were in that context. This type of late night contact between an upright man of Judea and an unmarried woman, especially a foreigner, was very "inappropriate" then as it still might be considered by some today. Yet it didn't result in condemnation or penalty for Ruth. It actually led to redemption.

So as modern readers of this same story, how do we adapt it to our context?

Who are the childless widows of today? And how should we react when they seek desperate solutions to the hopeless situations they find themselves in?

These are certainly desperate times for many people. I've highlighted the plight of immigrants, and the struggles they face upon arriving here, as well as the often nightmarish journey just to get to the border. Our streets are filled with

those without permanent shelter or means of support. Often addiction goes hand in hand with housing instability. Just in our city we see people in crisis on a daily basis outside our doors. How should we respond? Do we just leave them our own version of gleanings, and walk away satisfied that we've done what's required, made our required, token contribution?

Like the original audience of Ruth's story, this scripture gives us the same challenges. What should our response be when people's circumstances get so dire that they resort to actions that go against the ethics and standards we cling to? I'm sure many in Ruth's time would use those rules and laws to judge and condemn her. Do we look down our noses at those who make choices that we think we would never consider, without ever having a real appreciation for the circumstances they find themselves stuck in? It can be easy to say that this one or that should just get a job, or straighten themselves out. But do we give any thought to how one gets a job without an address, or clean clothes and hygiene. How does one straighten themselves out when they use drugs to stay alert so they don't get robbed or accosted during the night, because they don't have a secure place to lay their head or store their stuff.

Like Ruth's audience, this scripture seeks to lead us to take a deeper look at how we handle those on the margins, and how we help them find solutions, not band-aids to the problems they face. As individuals, and as a congregation, what can we do to give others a hand-up, instead of just a hand-out? There are lots of efforts at work around us. I pray that we as individuals, and as the body of Christ, seek to see God's khesed at work around us, and join in that work. May

we all strive to be more like Boaz, and work to provide permanent resolutions instead of just more temporary fixes or judgmental denials. Amen.

Stewardship Reflection New Community Project - Special giving focus for August

A Call to Serve

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Let us offer our loaves and fishes in the service of God's kin-dom.

A Time for Reflection - Musical Interlude

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

O God, we share these gifts in the spirit of those who shared their loaves and fishes: we ask that you take these gifts and use them to feed all of creation—to produce seed and grain, filling humans and animals alike, and to restore wholeness in the places where malnourishment, physical and spiritual exists. Amen.

Hymn – Have thine own way - 504
BENEDICTION

Go forth today with new eyes,

Eyes that seek to see the Ruth's of the world

Eyes that look behind the desperate acts of desperate people

Eyes that seek God's vision of a hand up, not just a hand out. Amen.