

“Finding Community”
Ruth 2:13-17
October 26, 2014

INTRODUCTION:

We live in a time and place where loneliness is a growing problem. Almost everyone desires the intimacy of community, but many never find it. Jon Gunnemann is a social ethicist who summarizes our situation in America like this. We are a nation of relative strangers, full of “millions of people minimally attached to home and community, highly mobile, independently pursuing our own projects, contentedly leaving one another alone to pursue our own tasks.”

Today’s passage in Ruth is about the inner sanctum of community life, the shared meal. Ruth has been gleaning all morning, and now it is lunchtime. Anyone who’s been to school knows that meals can be the best time of the day, or they can be the worst time, depending on whether or not you are part of a close community. Anyone who’s gone to a new school knows the biggest question on the mind of a student. It has nothing to do with what happens in the classroom, and everything to do with what happens in the lunchroom. Who will I sit with at lunchtime? Wendy attended three different high schools in those years of her life, and she has told me of the challenge that was to her. Even though she is a pretty strong extrovert, she preferred to take her lunch to the library, where it was against the rules to eat, and find a carrel in an out of the way corner in order secretly to eat her lunch there. If you know my wife, you know that she hates breaking rules, but even that was preferable to facing the lunchroom without a community.

Shared meals can also be some of the richest times as well. Eating good food when you’re hungry is in itself a pleasurable experience. To do so with people you love, sharing stories and sharing your lives with one another, is a taste of heaven. It is interesting that Jesus instituted a shared meal to be central to our faith as Christians. Part of this is due to the fact that heaven itself is described as a shared meal, that of a banqueting feast. The events around this lunch meal in the middle of the barley harvest have much to tell us about how we find community. I notice three qualities here that are essential for establishing community.

I. Humility

Ruth exhibits humility in this passage, and humility is necessary for community. Notice her humility in her identification of herself as a servant in verse 13. There are different words for servant in Hebrew, and the one she chose was used of the lowest rank of servant. When she was invited to join the group for lunch, it is reported that she sat “beside” the reapers, a word

indicating that she took her place at the edge of the group rather than inserting herself in the middle. She does what Jesus will urge his followers to do. **“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast,... go and sit in the lowest place”** (Luke 14:8, 10).

Her humility also shines in her gratitude. Only humble people are grateful. They don't approach life with an entitlement attitude that is always calculating what they deserve, and the result of this humble approach is a thankful heart. You can feel the gratitude in verse 13 with her response to Boaz's kindness. **“I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, though I am not one of your servants.”**

Why is humility necessary for community? There are three reasons I can think of. First, many of the sins that prevent us from enjoying good community are related to an unwillingness to take the low place. Why have there been church splits over such minor issues as the color of the carpet in the sanctuary? It is not because there is one color more holy than another. It is because there is a lack of humility that evidences itself in proud people who want to be in control by making sure their preferences prevail.

Another reason humility is necessary for healthy community is that when we don't have humility, we develop a victim mentality. Paul Miller imagines a very different Ruth with a victim mentality. “She comes to the field seething at Naomi for ignoring her yesterday and not helping her today, and irritated at God that he has put her in a situation where she is alone and vulnerable. So when Boaz offers to help, she is only grudgingly thankful, since he doesn't know how hard her life is or what she's given up. How could his small gifts ever make up what she's lost? Her simmering bitterness, her wounded sense of injustice, saps the joy out of life” (*A Loving Life*, p. 91-92). A victim mentality results in very self-centered people sucking the life and joy out of communities.

There's one more connection between humility and community life that needs to be pointed out. The lack of humility, when combined with the presence of suffering, leads to anger. We have previously noted the great suffering endured by Ruth. What if she had had the proud attitude exhibited by so many today that they are owed a comfortable life? This attitude, fueled by an insufficient appreciation of the biblical doctrine of the fall of the human race into sin, assumes that God's role in the universe is chiefly one of making sure all but the most villainous among us live a comfortable, suffering-free life. Such a view is unprepared for the kind of suffering endured by Ruth, and can only respond with either despair or anger, both of which isolate us from others.

II. Generosity

Ruth is not the only one who is building community here. She does so through her humility, and Boaz does so through his generosity. One of the challenges in building community is that the more successful people are in building effective community, the more exclusive the community tends to become. If you are part of a Bible study group where you have built deep, loving relationships with others in the group, the tendency is to seek to protect that by being a little stand-offish toward outsiders. The closer your group gets, the more closed off you tend to become toward outsiders. It takes a generous person to resist that tendency, a person who is willing to put at risk some closeness in order to extend a welcome to others.

Boaz exhibits great generosity here. We see him welcoming her in, inviting her to join them for lunch. Back to the Junior High School lunchroom, this is like the most popular student in the school inviting you to sit with her at lunch. But in Ruth and Boaz's culture, it is even more remarkable. Men didn't generally even speak to women with whom they were unrelated, especially important men. Boaz shows no hesitation in breaking that custom, and speaks to Ruth himself instead of having a female servant do so. In almost all ancient cultures, eating together was seen as something special, to be done with those you were close to. Do you remember how Joseph, when he was second in command in Egypt, and still unknown to his brothers, ate separately when he invited them to a meal? But Boaz generously breaks through those cultural boundaries, risking the disapproval of his own servants and fellow citizens.

He shows generosity too in the food he gave to her. The verb in verse 14 says that he "passed" the roasted grain to her. The meaning of that word is uncertain. We get an idea of its meaning, though, from the fact that those who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in 200 BC used a Greek word that meant "heaped." In ancient Middle Eastern cultures, it was considered polite to leave some food on your plate, indicating that your host had been generous and fed you more than enough food. It's just the opposite in our culture. I can remember my grandmother's meals when I was a boy. If you didn't take seconds and clean your plate of those seconds, she would look hurt and ask, "Didn't you like it?" Ruth left some food on her plate, but the text tells us that she wasn't just being polite, pretending to be full when she wasn't. **"She ate until she was satisfied"** (v. 14).

His generosity continues when Ruth returns to her gleaning after lunch. Boaz has a word with his servants in which he directs them to act in a way that would assure Ruth of abundant provision. He tells the young men to allow her to glean among the sheaves. The sheaves were the bundles of barley stalks with the grain still on the stalks. Harvesting would begin with the men cutting the stalks and gathering them into bunches called sheaves. The women would then come and tie up the sheaves to be carted off for threshing. Normally, the gleaners would not be allowed in the fields until the sheaves had been

removed. In allowing Ruth to glean while the sheaves were still there, she would be guaranteed the first shot at picking up any stalks that had been dropped on the ground. Additionally, he orders the men to pull out some of the stalks before dropping their sheaves to the ground. Boaz's generosity, combined with Ruth's diligence, resulted in a banner day of gleaning. After she had threshed her grain, she had an ephah of barley. That would be about 29 pounds of grain, what a gleaner would normally expect to collect in almost a month of gleaning. Her bounty came at the expense of Boaz.

Let's pause for an application. Everyone wants to be a part of intimate community. But how does that happen? Many people think it's out there somewhere, and they just need to find it. They become consumers of community, always looking but never quite finding it. I agree with Paul Miller who says, "You don't *find* community; you create it through love." He goes on to add, "We've unwittingly made the quest for community central. The quest for intimacy can be just a veiled request for feeling good. Intimacy and community come from love, not the other way around. So instead of pursuing intimacy, we should pursue love." So here's the application. Become a humble Ruth by remembering what the Bible says about us all, that we are all undeserving sinners saved by grace. And become a Boaz by generously welcoming outsiders.

This generous welcome of outsiders is what the Bible calls hospitality. Hospitality in the Bible isn't throwing elaborate parties. It is showing love to strangers. That's exactly what Boaz is doing here. What was it that motivated Boaz in his actions? I mentioned last week that it wasn't romance, not yet anyway. That comes later in the story. For now, he is motivated by Ruth's faith and the fruit of her faith in her love for Naomi. Boaz sees in this Moabite woman what Israel is called to be. She is a true Israelite, and he does all in his power to welcome her into Israelite life. He goes about doing that by putting himself in her shoes and treating her as he would want to be treated. So he thinks what it would feel like to be sitting on the outside during lunch, and he invites her in. He thinks what it would be like to be poor and hungry, and he gives her enough not only for today, but for several days. He knows too that outsiders can easily feel shame, so he does all this in a way that preserves her dignity. She must work for her harvest. And Boaz's instructions to his servants will result in their changed attitude toward her. They have been given the joy of being generous to her by using someone else's property. The result of Boaz's actions is that Ruth is comforted. **"You have comforted me"** (v. 13).

Let me challenge you to consider how you might use hospitality to do what Boaz has done. Find outsiders who need someone to extend to them a welcoming gesture. And then give of yourself to do so. Arrange your Sunday so you can occasionally invite someone to have lunch with you and then find someone who needs a welcome.

III. Favor

Even though it is true that community is not found but created through love, there is also a sense in which it is a gift. Three times in the first 13 verses of our chapter Ruth uses the word “favor” to describe what she had been given. No matter what she would have done, she would not have been welcomed into community without the actions of Boaz. Boaz did show favor to her, with the result that in one day she went from a poor, unattached foreign woman to sitting at the table of the most important person in Bethlehem and going away not only with a full stomach, but with provision for many days to come.

The favor of Boaz is a picture to us of the grace of Jesus. In just a few minutes we will take the position of Ruth and dine at a table where Jesus is the host. This table of the Lord’s Supper is Jesus welcoming us into community, the community within the Trinity itself and the community of all the others who follow the Lord. The only requirement for eating at this table is to humble yourself by confessing your sin and believing in Jesus.

Like Boaz, Jesus has loved us by putting himself in our place in order to welcome us in. But unlike Boaz, he paid the ultimate price of his life that we might come in. Wendy showed me this week a blogpost of Jennifer Myrhe, a friend of ours who serves as a doctor with Serge in Africa. Jennifer was in Uganda several years ago right in the middle of an Ebola outbreak. In her blog, she was writing to an American audience in response to some of the hysteria that we have seen here. She was expressing gratitude to America for the commitment of the American military to aid in this effort. Her blog garnered many comments, some hostile. One of those hostile comments was from someone who said that American soldiers should not be put in danger just to help poor Africans far away from America. This person went on to say that if Jennifer wanted to “go skinny-dipping in Ebola juices,” that was her business, but don’t ask American soldiers to do so. Jennifer said that even though that phrase was meant to chastise her, she found it a great description of the incarnation. “It is a vivid image of Jesus, safe in eternity, entering this world of muck and danger, for us.”

CONCLUSION:

As we come to the Lord’s Table today, let us celebrate God’s welcome of us. We get to sit at the table of the King. Like Ruth, we are under his protection and receive his rich provision for us.