

The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of the most beloved in the Bible. Where we pick up the story today is at the end of a long and hard day of work for Ruth. She was gleaning the barley left behind by the field workers so she could provide some food for herself and Naomi. As it happens, Ruth ends up in the fields that belong to Boaz. He notices her and with the help of one of his servants learns that she is new to town and came to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Now we know from the story that Naomi's deceased husband Elimelech and Boaz are close relatives, but Ruth doesn't know this when she happens upon Boaz's field. With extraordinary concern, he tells Ruth to stick close to his young women servants and keep her eyes focused on the work in front of her. Then later he invites her to have lunch with him and his workers, giving her more than she could eat of the parched grain that was provided. After she had her fill, she held on to what was left over. After lunch Ruth returned to the fields to continue gleaning. As she did Boaz told his worker to leave extra in her path. This was an extraordinary act of kindness which Ruth probably thought was him just showing hospitality to a stranger from a foreign land, fulfilling Levitical code, but Boaz knows that she is family, even if only by marriage. He also heard that Ruth showed great devotion to Naomi by returning with her. Ruth as we are reminded often by the narrator is a widowed Moabite woman in a foreign land which puts her at the absolute bottom of society. But as a close relative of Naomi's husband, Boaz has a special obligation to help provide for their needs.

We pick the story up this morning with Ruth at the end of her long day.

**Ruth 2:17-23** (my translation)

17. So she gleaned in the field until evening, and she beat out what she had gathered, and it was about an ephah of barley.

18. Then she took it up and went into the city and her mother-in-law saw what she had gathered. Then she brought out and give to her what was left over after she was full.

19. Her mother-in-law said to her, "where did you glean today and where did you work? May the one who showed such regard for you be blessed." So, she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and she said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."

20 Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "May he be blessed by the Lord, who has not withdrawn his loving kindness to the living or the dead." Then Naomi said to her, "This man is family, he's one of our redeemers."

21. Ruth the Moabite then said, "He also told me, 'Stay close to my young men until they have finished all of my harvest.'"

22. Then Naomi replied to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "My daughter, it is better that you go out with his young women so that you won't be bothered in another field."

23. So she remained near Boaz's young women to glean until the end of the barley harvest **and** wheat harvest; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

### Ohana means family

There is a twenty-year-old Disney animated movie that is one of my family's favorites. You may remember the tale of a lonely young Hawaiian girl named Lilo who is living alone with her older sister. They decide to adopt a dog. Kind of a weird, ugly looking dog, that the little girl names Stitch. Well, as it turns out this dog is not really a dog but a rejected intergalactic experiment that was banished is a space pod but as luck would have it the pod crash landed on a tiny Hawaiian island on Earth. Well craziness ensues and Nani, Lilo's older sister is ready to take Stitch back to the animal shelter where they found him. But Lilo, out of exacerbation yells, "OHANA!" This catches Nani, and Stitch's attention so Lilo continues, "Ohana means family and family means no one gets left behind or forgotten." Nani replies, "Well, he hasn't been her that long." Lilo then pulls a mic drop and says, "neither have I, are you going to get rid of me too?" They of course don't send Stitch back to the shelter. More craziness ensues and then there is redemption, and everything turns out good in the end. It is a classic adventure tale of family love and loyalty even when times are hard. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.

Times were hard for Naomi and Ruth as they sojourned back to Naomi's hometown, Bethlehem. Being left behind when not only Naomi's husband dies, but also her two sons that married Ruth and Orpah put the three women a hard place. In a dramatic seen, Naomi insists that Orpah and Ruth stay in Moab and return to their homes knowing that they would have better luck in their own land and with their own families because *family means no one gets left behind or forgotten*. Orpah honors Naomi's plea and returns home in tears, while Ruth declares her loyalty to Naomi. Remember her beautiful vow from chapter one, "Do not force me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:17, NRSV). Ruth is saying, I choose you as my family and I will not ever forsake you. And she doesn't. She is loyal to the end.

Now, in today's passage, we learn that there is a man of wealth and considerable standing in Bethlehem named Boaz. He takes a special interest in providing an opportunity for Ruth to care for her mother-in-law, Naomi. When Naomi realizes that Boaz has been so generous, she become excited and hopeful. I can imagine her thinking: "Maybe there is hope for our redemption because he is a close relative, a redeemer-kinsman. He is family! Will he ensure that we are not left behind or forgotten?" Naomi says in her excitement, "May he be blessed by the lord, who has not withdrawn his loving kindness to the living or the dead." Naomi seems to be asking for special blessings on Boaz because he is remembering to care for Naomi and Ruth and has not forgotten his responsibility to honor Elimelech in his death. Although . . . she could also be referring to God as the one showing loving kindness, which would be a wonderful testimony especially after lamenting that God has dealt bitterly with her (1:20). I'd like to suggest that maybe she understands that God is showing loving kindness through the actions of Boaz. Isn't that how we understand God working in the world? We are to be the workers of good because as Teresa of Avila would say: "Christ has no hands and feet in the world but ours." Right?

On March 12th, the Washington Post published a story I saw online of a woman named Fania who lived in Ukraine in the 1940's with her parents and five siblings. The Germans invaded and forced Jews into ghettos and slave-labor camps. Everyone in Fania's family was killed except for

her. Somehow, she fled and escaped and was found by a woman named Maria who quickly took her in. She, along with her family hid and protected her for the last two years of the war. Once Ukraine was liberated, Fania moved to Israel where she started a family of her own. Fania often told her story to her children and grandchildren, sharing how grateful she was for the family that took her in, care for and protected her. Last month, her granddaughter, Sharon couldn't help but remember Fania's stories when she saw the news about the war raging in Ukraine. She knew she had to do something, so she called Maria's granddaughter and great niece living in Ukraine and offered to bring them to her home in Israel so they would be cared for and safe. After dealing with a lot of bureaucratic red tape and easily getting the support of the whole community, Sharon finally was able to receive cousins, Lesia and Alona from Ukraine about three weeks ago. Sharon described them as "part of the family" and "even closer than a blood connection." Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.

There are some many stories being witnessed to in the news these days of strangers at the Polish board and train stations across Europe. We see people holding signs saying, "we have room for two," "we have room for you." When a reporter asked some folks why they were offering to host strangers in their homes, so many people said, because we were once in their situation, or our parents were, it is horrible, and no one should be left behind or forgotten. I am reminded of the scripture that says, "The alien who comes to your land shall be to you as citizens among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34). So, we are to treat them like they are family.

I wonder who you call family? How far does family extend for you?  
Is it only those who share a blood connection, or is it more than that?  
If you are like me, you probably have varying degrees of family. You know, there are those you live with and don't know how you would ever manage without them. There are those that you might talk to weekly or get together with on special occasions. And there are those that seem to like to push your buttons and you would be just fine if the extent of your connection was the annual Christmas card received in the mail. Then there are people in our lives that we choose to call family because of a deep connection that is stronger than blood.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't also consider our families of faith.  
We are part of church families who care for and love one another; bring meals to each other when in need. We fellowship with one another and together offer ministries of compassion for the least of these among us.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians that we are destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will (Ephesians 1:5). So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19). We are family, each of us adopted into the household of God through Christ our redeemer. It's an amazing thing. It can also get hard and messy at times. Being family isn't always easy, but just like Naomi and Ruth, if we stick together, care for one another in the hard times, there is always hope that those times are only temporary. Because redemption comes.

Siblings in Christ, we are all adopted into one family, called to live and love and care and provide for each other. What better examples do we have for how to do that than Naomi and Ruth who did not forsake or leave each other, or for Boaz who carried out his role as their redeemer. How can we find ways to show loving kindness like Maria who cared for and protected Fania, or for Fania's granddaughter Sharon who returned Maria's kindness by welcoming Alona and Lesia into her home, fighting obstacles along the way, not giving up. And of course, for the littlest among us like Lilo who stops us in our tracks by yelling: OHANA! Which means: Family. And Family means: no one gets left behind or forgotten.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21)