

Ordinary 32B (Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17)

## **I'm afraid for Ruth. Boaz's words suggest either that Ruth has already been assaulted and humiliated, or that it would have been customary for a woman in her position to expect abuse.**

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

My husband's phone beeps and my body tenses with dread. I look at Brian's reddened eyes as they strain to focus on the screen. It's his day off, and he hasn't had any semblance of Sabbath in a while, so I worry about how long he can keep this up.

"It's a couple I met at the hotel," he explains. "The trailer park won't take them. They're homeless again, so I need to see what we can do."

"OK," I say. I wonder if I should stop him and remind him of boundaries and self-care. But then I recall that the Sabbath is when Jesus healed a withered hand, the disciples picked grain, and a worker led his donkey out of the ditch. This couple surely deserves as much attention.

Brian sighs, picks up the car keys, and leaves the house. I look down at my own work, sorting out the predicament of this homeless pair in our text, Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth travels with her mother-in-law after a devastating tragedy. They have lost everything. Naomi is mourning the death of her spouse and two sons; Ruth has lost her husband. We can assume that, without a man, they have also lost their property, income, and savings. But they do have a few resources. Ruth has her youth, Naomi has family connections, and they hold a covenant with each other. So they set out for Judah.

Much has changed since Ruth's day, but too much stays the same. In this country, we have developed incredible wealth—but we still have not learned to share it. Even though we have mastered so much technology, we still have not learned how to

make sure that working people receive a living wage.

Here in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the city recently emptied a hotel. It was a desolate place, with harsh lights and hard concrete. But it was also the sort of place that didn't require a background check, credit record, or down payment, so poor residents could live there. A person could go there if he had just gotten out of prison. A mom could take her children there if she was trying to leave her abusive spouse.

The city condemned the building and gave everyone a couple of days to collect their things and move out. Our city, with its already threadbare social structure, had a sudden influx of 1,500 homeless people. The Methodist church took in 30 people. The Baptist church housed five families. But there were so many more, and the needs seemed too heavy to bear. We live in the buckle of the Bible belt, but this doesn't stop us from sacrificing the poor on our altars of gentrification.

Brian, who started a community called Mercy Junction Justice and Peace Center, has been moving boxes and people from place to place. He carts former residents to pawnshops and to the center's free store. The staff has been holding fund-raisers and auctions and collecting donations of household goods, in order to help people like this couple turned out of the trailer park. It is a sort of gleaning, an alternative economy that emerges as people pick up the discarded abundance of their neighbors—like Ruth, who gleans in Boaz's fields.

I'm afraid for Ruth. I have read this story since I was a little girl, but it sounds so different now. There are many things not quite mentioned in the text, but it's easy to fill in the details from Boaz's words. "Keep your eyes on the fields," he instructs her. "I've ordered the young men not to assault you," he says. Then, to the workers, "Do not humiliate her" and "don't scold her."

I set down the scripture. Now it's not just this couple passing through my mind but scores of women I have met on the streets and in shelters, women who have been abused in their struggle for survival. Boaz's words suggest either that Ruth has already been assaulted and humiliated, or that it would have been customary for a woman in her position to expect abuse. Too many things have not changed.

When I read the book of Ruth as a child, I didn't understand how susceptible her body is. I didn't grasp the nature of her submission when she says, "All that you tell me I will do," or the sexual euphemisms of the threshing floor and the uncovered feet. I did not apprehend what it means for her to be redeemed, with all its

overtones of ownership and property. I did not—I could not—know how vulnerable, resilient, and courageous women could be.

Now I worry about Ruth when she goes to Boaz. Is he gentle with her? I imagine that he is, since he marries her. But then why does Ruth hand her baby over to Naomi to nurse? Why do the women say that Naomi has a child? Can't they see that the child is Ruth's? It is her submission, her womb, her flesh that saves them. Is she still an outsider, still a Moabite, even though she made a covenant to Naomi's people and her God?

There are so many things in this story that sound all too familiar. I have to swallow my despair, because in the days to come, more text messages will ping. I will hear more stories about displaced people on the east side of our town, and I will need to find hope in the midst of those stories. So I will look to Ruth and thank her for her solidarity and her salvation.