

God's Mercy Extends Even to Outsiders  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

**Ruth 2 THE MESSAGE BIBLE**

<sup>1</sup>It so happened that Naomi had a relative by marriage, a man prominent and rich, connected with Elimelech's family. His name was Boaz. <sup>2</sup>One day Ruth, the Moabite foreigner, said to Naomi, "I'm going to work; I'm going out to glean among the sheaves, following after some harvester who will treat me kindly." Naomi said, "Go ahead, dear daughter." <sup>3</sup>And so she set out. She went and started gleaning in a field, following in the wake of the harvesters. Eventually she ended up in the part of the field owned by Boaz, her father-in-law Elimelech's relative. <sup>4</sup>A little later Boaz came out from Bethlehem, greeting his harvesters, "God be with you!" They replied, "And God bless you!" <sup>5</sup>Boaz asked his young servant who was foreman over the farm hands, "Who is this young woman? Where did she come from?" <sup>6</sup>The foreman said, "Why, that's the Moabite girl, the one who came with Naomi from the country of Moab." <sup>7</sup>She asked permission. "Let me glean," she said, "and gather among the sheaves following after your harvesters." She's been at it steady ever since, from early morning until now, without so much as a break." <sup>8</sup>Then Boaz spoke to Ruth: "Listen, my daughter. From now on don't go to any other field to glean - stay right here in this one. And stay close to my young women. <sup>9</sup>Watch where they are harvesting and follow them. And don't worry about a thing; I've given orders to my servants not to harass you. When you get thirsty, feel free to go and drink from the water buckets that the servants have filled." <sup>10</sup>She dropped to her knees, then bowed her face to the ground. "How does this happen that you should pick me out and treat me so kindly - me, a foreigner?" <sup>11</sup>Boaz answered her, "I've heard all about you - heard about the way you treated your mother-in-law after the death of her husband, and how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and have come to live among a bunch of total strangers. <sup>12</sup>God reward you well for what you've done - and with a generous bonus besides from God, to whom you've come seeking protection under his wings." <sup>13</sup>She said, "Oh sir, such grace, such kindness - I don't deserve it. You've touched my heart, treated me like one of your own. And I don't even belong here!" <sup>14</sup>At the lunch break, Boaz said to her, "Come over here; eat some bread. Dip it in the wine." So she joined the harvesters. Boaz passed the roasted grain to her. She ate her fill and even had some left over. <sup>15</sup>When she got up to go back to work, Boaz ordered his servants: "Let her glean where there's still plenty of grain on the ground - make it easy for her. <sup>16</sup>Better yet, pull some of the good stuff out and leave it for her to glean. Give her special treatment." <sup>17</sup>Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. When she threshed out what she had gathered, she ended up with nearly a full sack of barley! <sup>18</sup>She gathered up her gleanings, went back to town, and showed her mother-in-law the results of her day's work; she also gave her the leftovers from her lunch. <sup>19</sup>Naomi asked her, "So where did you glean today? Whose field? God bless whoever it was who took such good care of you!" Ruth told her mother-in-law, "The man with whom I worked today? His name is Boaz." <sup>20</sup>Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Why, God bless that man! God hasn't quite walked out on us after all! He still loves us, in bad times as well as good!" Naomi went on, "That man, Ruth, is one of our circle of covenant redeemers, a close relative of ours!" <sup>21</sup>Ruth the Moabitess said, "Well, listen to this: He also told me, 'Stick with my workers until my harvesting is finished.'" <sup>22</sup>Naomi said to Ruth, "That's wonderful, dear daughter! Do that! You'll be safe in the company of his young women; no danger now of being raped in some stranger's field." <sup>23</sup>So Ruth did it - she stuck close to Boaz's young women, gleaning in the fields daily until both the barley and wheat harvesting were finished. And she continued living with her mother-in-law.



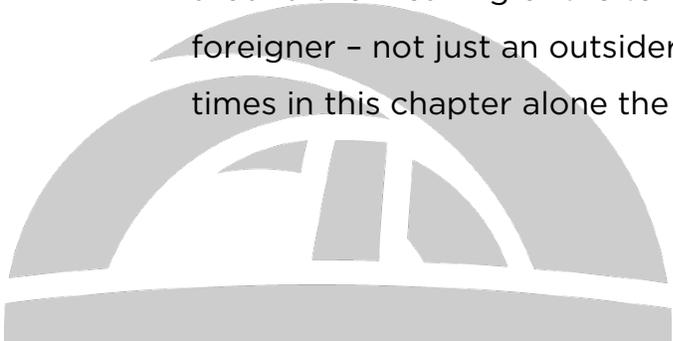
This week's Big Idea started with a conundrum. (In case you forgot, it's *God's Mercy Extends Even to Outsiders*.)

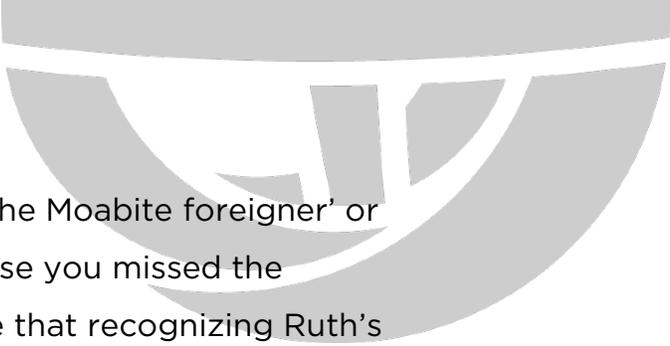
Writing the beginning was easy. After all, the second chapter of Ruth paints a beautiful picture of how merciful God is. Ruth is poor, far from home, with little to no hope for survival. Yet she is able to find a nearby field ripe with grain where she can gather food. Then the owner of the field takes notice of her, and showers her with kindness. This chapter shows that through people like Boaz, God takes care of people in need. And we can extrapolate from that that God cares for people in need through people like us, too.

But Ruth wasn't just a person in need. She was from Moab. And that little detail would have raised the eyebrows of anyone listening to the story back in Bible times. The people of Israel saw Moabites as hostile, dirty, morally inferior. They didn't deserve the time of day, let alone any act of kindness. That God shows mercy to a foreigner like Ruth is the shocking part of this story. It's worth including in a Big Idea.

And that's where the conundrum came in. Because these days the word 'foreigner' has become politically charged. This election season included some ugly assumptions that immigrants are a threat to our nation's freedom and prosperity. And it included some ugly allegations that people who are concerned about things like immigration and border security are heartless and cruel. I worried that using 'foreigner' in the Big Idea might make people stop listening before the conversation could even begin. And so, after getting feedback from a couple of my colleagues, I opted for a less-inflammatory word: *Outsider*.

But I'll be honest. That felt a little like chickening out. That's kind of dancing around the meaning of the text. Because it's clear that Ruth's identity as a foreigner – not just an outsider – is central to this story. Eight different times in this chapter alone the author points out that she is not one of





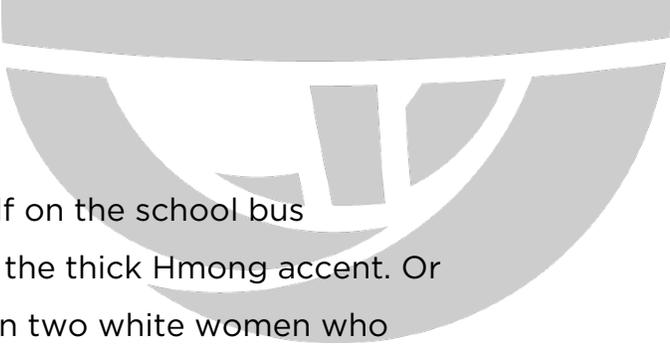
God's chosen people. She is 'the Moabite' or 'the Moabite foreigner' or even 'the Moabite woman from Moab' (just in case you missed the reference the first time around.) That says to me that recognizing Ruth's heritage is critical when reading this text.

In fact, the Bible tells a lot of stories about people who are far from home. It uses a lot of different words to describe them, too. Foreigner. Stranger. Outsider. Alien. Refugee. Sometimes those people are God's people — think Abraham and Sarah traveling to Egypt, or the Hebrews traversing the wilderness before settling in the Promised Land. Sometimes these people are not God's people but act in Godly ways — think the woman at the well, or the parable of the Good Samaritan, or Ruth the Moabite woman from Moab. Sometimes these foreigners are to be feared and seen as the enemy. But not always. And when we begin to make assumptions about who is in and who is out, we so often find ourselves on the wrong side of God's line.

Last week was the Southeastern Minnesota Synod Bishop's Theological Conference. Pastor Jason, Pastor Lisa and I all attended. The theme was about dismantling racism. We talked about the ways we don't fully understand what it's like to be a person of color. And when I say we, I mean we: there were only 5 leaders in our synod there who are not white. Despite some very intentional efforts to build bridges and create a place for all to belong, our church remains overwhelmingly racially homogenous.

The first step we took was to listen. And listen we did: one of the speakers was Kao Kalia Yang, a Hmong writer from St. Paul. She's the author of [The Late Homecomer](#). Kalia and her family are refugees. They came to Minnesota from Laos when she was a child. During her presentation she told raw, honest, painful stories about times in her life when she has felt the direct slap of racism. Like the time her father was fired from his job for encouraging his coworkers to speak up about unsafe working conditions.





Or the entire year her little brother sat by himself on the school bus because no other kid would talk to the boy with the thick Hmong accent. Or the night at a bar in downtown Minneapolis when two white women who were waiting to use the bathroom refused to use the toilet after her because she might have contaminated it.

As she told story after story, the air room was heavy. And then one of the attendees at the conference stood up, looked at her, and said, “I see you. I see you. And I thank God for you.”

Isn't that what we all long for — to be seen? To be seen exactly as we are? Not diminished or judged or scorned. Not pitied or vilified based on what folks think they know about us. But to be seen as worthy of God's mercy.

Who have you seen today—and who have you overlooked, consciously or not? Honestly answering that question is the first step in breaking the insidious hold racism has on our society. Instead of looking at another person's skin and jumping to conclusions, can we see them first as a fellow child of God? Instead of buying into stereotypes and succumbing to fear, can we listen and learn and seek to understand?

Imagine how much differently Ruth's story would have turned out if the people of Bethlehem had responded to Ruth's Moabite heritage the way so many people today react to folks from countries like Syria or Iran or Mexico. There would have been no basket of grain to feed her mother-in-law, no cool water to quench her thirst, no assurance that the rustling she heard behind her as she worked was nothing to be afraid of.

But there was. And that's the word of grace in this Big Idea. God's mercy does extend even to outsiders — not because outsiders need more of God's care, but because we are all outsiders in some way. All it takes to become a foreigner is to travel to another country. That might be by choice. That





might be by necessity. But if you've ever been in an unfamiliar place and felt even for a moment that you did not belong, you know the comfort and relief that comes when someone gives you help. We need to watch over each other.

In Hebrew, the word for 'watches over' is *shamar*. We hear it in places like Psalm 146. The psalmist writes, "The Lord watches over the stranger; God upholds the orphan and the widow."

Pastor Emily Carson writes, "It is no small thing that the word *shamar* is used 468 times in the Old Testament. Sometimes it refers to the guarding and protecting that God provides. Sometimes it refers to God's command that we protect each other. As people of faith, we are called to a life of *shamar*... of guarding and keeping each other." This is how God extends mercy — to outsiders, and to all of us. God's mercy comes when we see — really see — each other. God's mercy comes when we acknowledge our differences and yet strive to love each other anyway. God's mercy comes when we confess all the ways big and small that we have looked down on and turned away from people based on the color of their skin or the language they speak. God's mercy comes when we actually get to know our neighbors who are different than us.

Friends, every small act of mercy matters. Sometimes you will be the one sharing mercy with another. Sometimes you will be the one receiving it. But always, always, know that it is God's doing. Because we all matter to God. Amen.

