



## SAFE PLACES

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It always does my heart good when people in the congregation take to heart what I have to say in my sermons. Last Sunday I mentioned how cool it would be if we could become a character from our favorite book. I said I would be Harold from Harold and the Purple Crayon.

Well, apparently that inspired several of you to become your own characters this week, and they were spotted around town in all their glory. In fact the New Day photographer happened to be on hand to catch them.

I believe we have a shot of Nancy Zellerhoff looking a lot like Madeline. And who could forget Lisa Johnston in her Pippi braids. Was that Char Haake dressed as a Young Sherlock Holmes? Derek was of course dressed as Spider Man. But since he wasn't here last week, I think that's just his normal Thursday look.

I don't know if there's a point to any of that nonsense, other than to say I hope we can all begin to visualize ourselves in the great story of redemption God is writing. We are working our way through the book of Ruth with the idea in mind that it has something to say about how we connect with a world that needs God's love.

Last week we looked at Naomi's role in reaching Ruth. We made the observation that you cannot not share your faith – whether or not you're talking to other people about God, your life and words are communicating something about what you believe. So we have to take a look at what it is we're communicating. We said that God doesn't need us to be his salespeople, putting a spin on his image. And we said that the act of reaching out in and of itself can become one of the greatest sources of joy for us personally. As one author put it, our faith grows when we give it away. What is best for the world turns out to be best for us as well.

This morning we are going to redirect our attention from Naomi to a new character who emerges in chapter 2. Again, this is a somewhat lengthy passage, but it's such a good story I want to read it all in one piece.

### **Ruth 2**

*Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, from the clan of Elimelech, a man of standing, whose name was Boaz.*

*And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, "Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favor."*

*Naomi said to her, "Go ahead, my daughter." So she went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.*

*Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, "The LORD be with you!"*

*"The LORD bless you!" they called back.*

*Boaz asked the foreman of his harvesters, "Whose young woman is that?"*

*The foreman replied, "She is the Moabitess who came back from Moab with Naomi. She said, 'Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.' She went into the field and has worked steadily from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter."*

*So Boaz said to Ruth, "My daughter, listen to me. Don't go and glean in another field and don't go away from here. Stay here with my servant girls. Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the girls. I have told the men not to touch you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled."*

*At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She exclaimed, "Why have I found such favor in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?"*

*Boaz replied, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge."*

*"May I continue to find favor in your eyes, my lord," she said. "You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant -- though I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls."*

*At mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar."*

*When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, "Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her."*

*So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.*

*Her mother-in-law asked her, "Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!"*

*Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working. "The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz," she said.*

*"The LORD bless him!" Naomi said to her daughter-in-law. "He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." She added, "That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers."*

*Then Ruth the Moabitess said, "He even said to me, 'Stay with my workers until they finish harvesting all my grain.'"*

*Naomi said to Ruth her daughter-in-law, "It will be good for you, my daughter, to go with his girls, because in someone else's field you might be harmed."*

*So Ruth stayed close to the servant girls of Boaz to glean until the barley and wheat harvests were finished. And she lived with her mother-in-law.*

There's a new TV show out right now called Undercover Boss. CEOs of big companies are given a fake identity then sent out to different locations of their company to go undercover as entry level employees to see what it's like.

One of the first participants was Larry O'donnell of Waste Management. He traded in his suit and tie for coveralls and a hard hat. He went and picked up trash at a landfill, drove a garbage truck for a day and cleaned out port-a-potties. As he did manual labor and heard the stories of what employees were dealing with and the conditions they were working in, it affected him deeply. He began to lose sleep. He was moved to tears. And when he went back to the corporate office, he immediately implemented changes to make things better.

I think Boaz would have done really well on that show. He was a boss who cared deeply about the people working for him, who noticed what was going on. He looked for ways to change the environment and make it better for the people working there.

But there was something more going on for Boaz than just being a good boss in this story. At its root, what he was doing was creating a safe place for Ruth. That was no small thing. It was a dangerous world for a single woman who was a foreigner. She was defenseless in a world of men with no one to protect her. She was in need and at the mercy of everyone else, searching for a way to survive. Boaz offered her a refuge where she could get what she needed without fear.

It struck me that what he did for Ruth on a physical level is what we as Christians are called to do on a spiritual level. Because as we said last week, we all encounter Ruths every day – men and women who feel like they are outsiders when it comes to faith. Some are hungry to connect with God. They're searching, but confused. Some are dealing with grief and pain. Some feel like they don't fit in and they're lonely. And for some, church is a foreign, intimidating world they can't navigate.

Jesus emphasized the importance of welcoming such people. He told his disciples about how God will divide us up at the end of time, like separating sheep and goats.

**Matthew 25:34-36**

*Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."*

The way we treat outsiders and strangers reflects something much deeper, because Jesus says it is him we are welcoming or not welcoming. It is him we are asked to make a safe place for.

But let's be honest: churches are quite often NOT safe places. And Christians are not always welcoming people. We like to think we are. It can be great for the insiders. Author Kennon Callahan has found that when he surveys churchgoers about their churches, everyone tends to pat themselves on the back and say, "This is a friendly church." And Callahan says, "Of course they all think it's a friendly church. Everyone who thought it WASN'T a friendly church isn't there."

One of the most eye opening things for me in starting a new church was talking to people about their past church experiences. I cannot tell you how many horror stories I have heard. Many, many people have been deeply wounded by the very communities that call themselves the body of Christ.

And these are stories coming from insiders. Outsiders often don't even consider the church as a safe place for themselves. In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells the story of his friend who was trying to reach out to a woman who was a prostitute. She was homeless, a junkie and trying to find food for her two year old. Yancey's friend said,

*I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naïve shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse.*

And Yancey says, "What struck me about my friend's story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift?"

We have the best possible news in the world to give people – that because of Jesus dying on the cross, God isn't holding our sins against us anymore. Because of Jesus' resurrection, death doesn't have to mean the end for us. What could possibly outshine that as message?

And yet the WAY we deliver that message sometimes makes it sound more like bad news. Christians often have a reputation for being intolerant and holier-than-thou. In Jesus' day, people who were desperate for hope seemed to sense they were safe with him. Can we say the same thing about ourselves?

When I look at what Boaz did, I see five distinct ways he became a safe person for Ruth. Those five ways carry over directly to how we can be safe people and a safe church for whoever comes our way struggling to make it spiritually.

Our story this morning really hinges on Ruth's initial decision to get up and go out to the fields to find food. It was the Old Testament version of dumpster diving. She was counting on there being some leftover scraps to pick up after the harvesters had done their work. That was a good plan on her part, because it was God's law for farmers to leave some of their crop behind for the poor to find.

**Deuteronomy 24:19-22**

*When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this.*

God wanted Israel to remember where they had come from. They had been poor. They had been displaced. They were only in the Promised Land because he had reached out to and rescued them. Showing compassion in their harvesting practices was intended to keep them in that place of gratitude and remind them of their own dependence on God.

Boaz followed this law of God. He allowed the poor to glean in his fields, which was the first step in creating a safe zone for Ruth. And I think we can take away from this that I am being a safe place for people when...

**I remember that grace is for me.**

In order to be someone who offers grace to others, I need to be keenly aware of just how much grace I've been given. Because as soon as I start thinking of it as something for other poor souls that are less fortunate than me, I create a divide that shouldn't be there.

Peter Berger once observed that our attempts at reaching out to people are often a mix of arrogance (“I know the answers”) and benevolence (“I want to save you”). He’s right. We like that feeling of power and control that comes from being the person with the solution, the hero who can rescue someone else.

Christ calls us to remember our own need for grace. The more aware we are of our own limits, our own sinfulness, our own dependence on God, the safer we become for other people.

I’ve been a Christian for a long time – over thirty years at this point. Remembering back to my need for grace when I invited Christ into my life is a difficult task. I can’t quite remember those days as a wild, rebellious, pagan five year old. But what we’re talking about is not remembering some distant point in time from our past – it is remembering our need for fresh grace on a daily basis. And that is not nearly as much of a stretch. I have plenty of reminders of my own weaknesses – if I’m willing to acknowledge them.

Why is that so important? Because if I don’t remember what it’s like to need Jesus, I won’t have any sense of urgency to reach other people who need him. If I don’t remember that I need Jesus, I will be judgmental and self-righteous around those who do. If I act like I’ve got it all together on my own, I will be unapproachable for people who feel terrible about themselves. Jesus told his followers,

**Luke 7:47**

*One who is forgiven little shows little love.*

The way to be a grateful, loving and compassionate community begins by bringing to the Lord as much as we can for forgiveness. The more openly we recognize our need for grace, the safer we are for other people.

Boaz allowed gleaning in his fields, giving himself that constant reminder of his own dependence on God. And that created a space where Ruth could find grace herself.

You can picture the scene when Boaz arrives at the field. All the workers stop and look up from their harvesting. Boaz gives them a big wave and yells, “The Lord be with you!”

Commentators say this was more than just the normal “Hey, how’s it going?” There is more intentionality in his words than just a casual greeting in it. Boaz is recognizing that God was with these workers, and he asked for his blessing on their work.

Another characteristic of a safe zone is that **I recognize God is already there.**

God is already at work in the lives of people who don’t know him. We often act like he isn’t. I had a professor in seminary who talked about how missionaries often go out as if they’re taking God with them in their suitcase. As a result, they don’t see where God has already been at work in the lives of the very people they hope to reach. It creates an “us vs. them” view of the world.

Our starting point needs to be the belief that God is at work everywhere in the world. Our job is not to transport him around, but to recognize him where he is and help other people see what he is doing as well.

That changes the way we look at each other. If you're distant and separate and I'm the one with an "in" to God, then it puts me in control. And it makes me very wary of you. I want to keep up a guard. But when my God is also the God that's doing something in your life, even if you don't know it, then it makes you less of a stranger. You're someone he loves, and therefore somebody he has a stake in. So I better treat you well.

That frees me up from the pressure to try and introduce God into your world. Instead I can take joy in identifying where he's already at work. And I can ask for his blessing on you and what you're doing.

After Boaz had greeted everybody, he immediately saw Ruth, a face he didn't recognize. So he asked the foreman for her background. Everything Boaz did from that point forward flowed from what he learned about who she was.

I love that, because I can only become a safe place when **I really hear people's stories.**

I like to think that I have excellent instincts about people. I look at their appearance, their behavior, their posture and do my own version of profiling. It lets me write people off very quickly. Sometimes I can develop a strong negative opinion from a distance, in a matter of minutes.

I remember my first night at seminary, there was this guy who looked a little like Teddy Roosevelt, with glasses and a moustache. He looked super conservative and uptight. He was wearing a suit jacket to a night class. Who does that? He looked like all the reasons I didn't want to be a pastor, and I was sure he would be obnoxious and overbearing and the last person I wanted to talk to.

Guess what? He ended up becoming my only real friend through seminary and he is an absolutely golden human being. What made the difference? It wasn't that he changed. It was that I got to know the REAL him and not just my made up opinion based on a first impression.

We have to be like Boaz and ask the question, "Who is this person?" Everyone is on a journey, and that journey deserves a hearing. We can't jump to conclusions about them based on superficial reasons.

When Boaz heard Ruth's story, he told her how much respect he had for what she had been through. He asked God's blessing on her. And here was Ruth's response:

*You have given me comfort and have spoken kindly to your servant.*

She felt comforted because her story was heard and acknowledged. When people feel heard, they feel understood. And when they feel understood they feel safe.

Ruth wasn't just coming to the fields to have a spot to hang out for the day. She was coming there with the intention of getting food. She was hungry. So Boaz made sure she would find plenty of grain. He told his workers,

*Even if she gathers among the sheaves, don't embarrass her. Rather, pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don't rebuke her.*

He was making it as easy as he could for her. He also made sure she knew where the water was and how she could get a drink anytime she wanted.

Part of creating a safe place is making sure that **I resolve to make access easy**. For as straightforward as the gospel message is, we can sure make it hard to understand. Christians can end up talking to ourselves because we don't intentionally provide entry points. For instance we tell people to "accept Jesus in their hearts" or "Make Jesus Lord of Your life" But what does that mean? I went out and checked out some videos on YouTube that were supposed to be presentations of the gospel, and even I couldn't make sense of them. If I were wanting to understand what being a Christian was, I would have been totally lost.

I remember once when I was working at the ad agency, a co-worker was asking me about my faith, and I walked through a big explanation of how Christ was our substitute and took our punishment for sin and all that. I was feeling pretty good, until she told me what I said hadn't made any sense to her at all. It was just gibberish. And I realized to my dismay that I wasn't thinking about the gospel in terms of accessibility. I hadn't put myself in the shoes of someone hearing it for the first time.

There are really two things to make sure we keep accessible: The gospel, and our own personal stories.

The story of Christ dying for us on the cross never changes, but every individual who hears it needs someone to build a bridge between the story and their lives. It is not their responsibility to find that bridge – it is mine and yours. We can't use a cookie cutter – we need to think about the needs of that individual and where the entry point may be. Maybe it will be through a life situation they're going through, or a question that's been on their mind, or through a favorite activity of theirs. I picked up a book one time that told the gospel completely in terms of golf. Whatever it is, we need to put the story of Christ in terms that are easily grasped by the other person.

We also need to give people access to our own individual stories. We need to know how to talk about our own relationship with God, because otherwise, it's just a bunch of abstract ideas. The more transparent we can be with our own struggles, the safer we become for other people to share theirs. The Junior Highers just spent some time working on their personal spiritual timelines – writing down key events in their life that

had shaped them. The goal is so they can know their own stories well enough to share them with somebody else.

I was talking with Diana Morrow this week. She's on her way to Montana right now or I would have asked her to come up and share with you. But we got talking about the way she came to know the Lord. Diana had grown up in a Mormon home, but had abandoned that faith when she got older. She was working as a waitress, and one day a customer asked her where she went to church and invited her to a Bible study.

Diana wasn't really looking for God, but she was looking for friends, so she went. And there she discovered a group of women she described as being "very authentic." The teaching was great, but it was the honesty of their sharing that compelled her.

And the group also shared with her what they called the "30 second gospel," which was the good news boiled down to the bare essentials. It clarified and simplified the message of Jesus into such an accessible format it spoke to Diana. She had been raised on complicated and confusing rules, but this made sense. It was the door she needed.

I don't have a copy of that 30 second gospel. But that's a great way to hone it down to the main points. Let me give you my take on a 60 second version as an example.

*God made humanity and loves us. He intended us for relationship with him. God is perfect and pure and holy. Anything less than pure, perfect and holy can't survive in his presence. It's like putting paper near a fire.*

*The first humans rebelled against God and passed on the sin gene to all of us, creating a deep divide between people and God, since people were now sinful and impure. It was a death sentence.*

*No human has ever had the power to erase the sin and reconnect with God and live up to his purity. People keep trying, but we're all still flawed.*

*God still wanted relationship with us. But he couldn't just look the other way without becoming less than himself. The sin had to be dealt with somehow for the relationship to be restored. So God chose to take the death sentence on himself. He sent his son Jesus, who was both God and human.*

*Because he was God, he was able to live that perfect life none of us could. But he died like all the rest of us to take our place and reverse the curse sin had left us under. Then he rose again, conquering death. Now he offers us life on the other side of death.*

*God no longer sees us in terms of our sin and imperfection. He sees what Jesus did as more than enough for relationship to be restored. All we have to do is believe in what Jesus did and quit trying to reconnect with God through our own means.*

Speed isn't important – making Jesus more accessible is what matters. The more we can frame it in ways people understand and relate to, the more at ease they will be and the more freedom they will have to gain the understanding they need.

One additional step Boaz did to ensure Ruth's safety was to talk with his men about her. He told them not to touch her, not to embarrass her or yell at her. Now with all those warnings, it is quite likely that an incident had already occurred. Read between the lines and you start to think maybe the men had been harassing Ruth before Boaz got there. At the very least, Boaz knew they had a track record of that kind of behavior in the past. So he was very frank in addressing the situation.

That's a final element of being a safe place is : **I readily admit and right wrongs.** I wish we could say that safe zones are the places where nothing goes wrong in the first place. But if that's what it takes to be safe, we'll never make it. None of us is perfect.

We do have a choice about what happens when wrongs are done. We can cover them up and deny the problem, or we can accept responsibility and take steps to correct it.

I once went to church with families who had never resolved a fight from years before. They still went to the same church and never talked about it. They sat on opposite sides of the sanctuary. But there was this layer of fakeness and fear of confrontation that seeped into everything that happened in that congregation. People thought if they ignored it, it would go away. But it didn't. And it prevented the church from being a place where new people felt free to come and be open about their issues. The culture was one of fear and artificial nice.

So much unnecessary pain could be avoided if we would be quicker to own our actions. When we don't, we're essentially telling the other person, "Your feelings about this don't matter. You're making too big of a deal out of nothing." That's crazy making and will cause the other person to feel very unsafe around us.

Taking responsibility means saying we're sorry without an explanation of why we did what we did. Taking responsibility means working to restore the trust that has been broken. Taking responsibility means being proactive in making sure the same mistake doesn't happen again.

That's what Boaz offered Ruth. And it was exactly what she needed.

As you look at that list of five characteristics, I'd like you to consider two questions. First, where do I think I am currently the least safe for other people? Am I acting judgmental? Do I see that God is already doing something in their life? Am I taking the time to hear their story? Am I admitting my own wrongs? Choose just one of those areas where you would like God to help you become more of a Boaz.

The second question would be this: Why am I unsafe in that area? What is it about me that makes it hard to show grace? Am I feeling insecure myself? Do I constantly compare myself to others?

We can't be a safe place if we don't feel safe ourselves. And that brings us back to our own trust in Christ. All through Scripture, God is referred to as our safe place. He's a strong tower. A refuge. A rock. A shelter. A fortress. Our life is "hidden in Christ." And before Jesus went back up to heaven, he told his followers, "I am going to prepare a place for you." Which you know will be the safest place of all. We can rest in complete confidence that he will be careful and trustworthy with us. Like Naomi said, if we stay in his field, we won't come to any harm.