

GeneroUS Sermon Series
We Are Each Other's Harvest - Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 (NRSV)
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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/we-are-each-others-harvest

For several years, I've followed a guy named Carlos Whitaker on Instagram, a social media platform. Carlos has done a lot of things over the years – a worship leader, an author, a speaker, a podcaster, a husband, and dad to three. When someone asked his wife, Heather, what Carlos does for a living, she replies, "He's a Hope Dealer." He tells stories about hope, and he invites others to be hope dealers, too.

Carlos travels all over the nation speaking at churches and conferences. One day while in line for lunch during a layover in the Atlanta airport, he heard some amazing piano music. At first, he thought it was just the music through the airport system, but then he saw a gentleman playing a grand piano. He grabbed his lunch and sat down nearby to enjoy the music. Eventually, he started a conversation with the man. 66-year-old Tonee had been playing at the airport for four years. Tonee had been unable to travel to play like he used to due to kidney failure and daily dialysis. As Carlos listened to him play, he noticed Tonee only had \$13 in his tip jar, and he had been playing for a few hours by then.

So, Carlos, who has over 200,000 followers on Instagram, recorded Tonee playing and posted it on his Instagram account, inviting his followers, known as the Insta familia, to give a tip to this guy virtually. Carlos had no idea if people would or not, but he felt led by the Spirit to share this moving story with others.

Within one hour, his followers had given \$10,000. Carlos had to go catch his plane, so he let Tonee know before he flew out. Tonee was in shock, blown away by the generosity of complete strangers. By the time Carlos arrived home in Nashville that evening, the amount was at \$55,000. By the time that Carlos closed the all down, his "Insta-Familia" had raised over \$70k to give to Tonee. This has changed Tonee's life, and Tonee continues to pay the generosity forward.

In a news cycle full of division and self-interest, stories like these resonate with people. We ache for stories of hope and goodness. They are balm to our weary, discouraged souls. This story about Tonee and Carlos was picked up by major media outlets, and they've been interviewed countless times. Carlos's instafamilia continues to grow, and in the past six months since they began, they have given over \$775,000 – nearly one million dollars - to complete

strangers and organizations alike as they work together to do what none of them could do on their own. They are, indeed, **generoUS**.

When these internet strangers from different races, different cultures, different religions, different political ideologies, and different financial means come together, extraordinary things happen – not just for the recipient of the generosity but as much so for those giving. Carlos invited them to be active participants in a larger story of hope and redemption. They were included in something greater than themselves. They've become a community centered around generosity and hope. The Insta-familia is now organizing meetups in various cities. Generous living is a powerful, unifying, hope-dealing way of living.

Stories like these are beacons to us, guiding us to who we hope to be, who we were created to be, who we've been called to be as people made in the image of a generous, hope-dealing God.

This morning I want to share with you another inspirational story of generosity and hope – the story of a mother and daughter-in-law, both widows. These women came from two different groups of people with a long history of fighting, yet their story of love, faithfulness, and generosity through the greatest of heartbreaks and hardships still inspires us today.

Our assigned Bible reading today plops us down toward the end of the story, so let me set the stage before we read our text. The opening of the Book of Ruth found in our Old Testament begins with sorrow. There was a famine in the region that devastated the town of Bethlehem where Naomi and her husband, both Israelites, lived. So, they left to live in Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea.

Moabites and Israelites had a long, complicated history. They were enemies. But the need to survive can lead us to cross lines we normally would not dare cross, to move to where we normally would not go. While living in Moab, Naomi's two sons eventually married Moabite women named Ruth and Orpah. But after a decade, all three women were left alone when their husbands passed away. As widows living in a world that was very much a man's world, they were now the most vulnerable, the most marginalized.

Naomi, hearing things are now better back home in Bethlehem, decided to return. Both Ruth and Orpah insisted on going with her, but Naomi told them to return to their own mothers. That it would be better for them among their own people. Orpah kissed Naomi, and left, but Ruth "clung to Naomi," refusing to leave her side. Out of loyal love to Naomi, Ruth chose to move and live with Naomi as a widowed, childless immigrant from an enemy country. They arrived back at Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

To provide for Naomi and herself, Ruth, in a spirit of love and generosity, goes to work the fields among the poor and outsiders. The Hebrew Law contained a command that landowners

must not harvest all the produce of their fields, but rather leave the corners and edges uncut and only comb the field once. In this way, the poor – the orphans, the widows, the immigrants – could come behind and gather the uncut grain and missed scraps. This was a law in this community about how-to live-in relationship with one another that reflected God’s heart – that we are all connected, that we are each other’s harvest.

Gwendolyn Brooks was the first Black author to win the Pulitzer Prize and to be appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, a position now known as U.S. Poet Laureate. In her 1970 poem entitled “Paul Robeson” she wrote these lines, *“We are each other's harvest; we are each other's business; we are each other's magnitude and bond.”*ⁱ

“We are each other's harvest” means that when we nurture and support one another, we all benefit, or reap the rewards of another's success and well-being.

Boaz, a devote Jew full of integrity, knew well this law of the harvest and practiced it faithfully. And it was his field that Ruth shows up to that day. When he notices Ruth and learns of her story and her sacrificial faithfulness to her mother-in-law, he shows extravagant generosity to her, going above and beyond what was required of the law. He gave her permission to gather in places normally forbidden and instructs his men to protect her and to leave out extra for her to gather. That evening, Ruth brought home an abundance because of the generosity of Boaz.

Surprised, Naomi asked where Ruth gathered so much in one day, and Ruth tells her about Boaz and his generosity. Naomi, in amazement, tells Ruth that Boaz is a relative of Naomi’s deceased husband which makes Boaz a near kinsmen, a family protector or redeemer. This cultural practice in Israel declared that if a man in the family died, and he left behind a wife or children or land, it was the family Redeemer’s responsibility to marry that widow, to take up the land and protect that family. So, Naomi begins to hope that perhaps there might still be a future for her family through Boaz. Chapter 3 begins with Naomi guiding Ruth on how to get Boaz to notice her and their kinship and that is where our text picks up today in chapter 3 and then skipping to the concluding verses of chapter 4.

Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, “My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Now wash and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” 5 She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”

Ruth obeys Naomi and takes the initiative to let Boaz know she is ready to marry and to ask Boaz to fulfill the law by marrying her. Boaz, moved by Ruth's loyal love to Naomi and learning of their kinship, agrees.

Chapter 4: So, Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The beautiful story of the Book of Ruth concludes with a shocking, soap-opera-like-twist, by telling us Ruth and Boaz's son is Obed, the father of Jesse, the grandfather of David – the future king of Israel, and the lineage that eventually would lead to Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Ruth, the widowed immigrant from Israel's enemy, becomes the great-grandmother of Israel's beloved King. Ruth, the Moabite who should have never be allowed in the assembly of God based on the religious laws of the time, ends up playing a foundational role in the life of Israel, becoming one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Once again, God defies our human declarations of who's in and who's out in God's great story of redemption.

Through the generous spirit and loyalty of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz and through God at work in all the seemingly mundane, ordinary of their days, all the tragedies are reversed. Marriage, family. They each in their own, unique ways become hope-dealers. They are each other's harvest, each other's business, each other's magnitude and bond. Their decisions on how to use what they have – whether wealth or time or loyalty or privileges – whether to use these for the common good or solely for their own benefit had ripple effects for generations.

The story of this ancient Insta-familia is a story of God partnering with God's people to make God's dream for the world possible. The book of Ruth invites us to consider how God might be inviting us – through obedience and generosity - to partner together in God's greater story of redemption, to be hope-dealers with God.

There are countless stories of how First Baptist Church family has joined together to be generous partners with God in dealing hope. Here are just a few I am aware of in the past month:

- Sunday School classe providing a bereavement meal for a widow and her family during their time of grieving.
- Two ladies who gives rides week after week to those unable to drive.
- A couple giving money so three youth could go to fall retreat next weekend.
- A church that donated candy and time to dress up and bless our community through Trunk or Treat.
- A small group of freshmen girls who purchased tickets to go support a friend in her school play.
- A church that gives faithfully to our budget needs to support these facilities so we can gather to worship, host formation programs for all ages, host recovery groups and grief support groups and Boy Scout troops and recreational groups.
- A couple opening their home and wallet to provide a fun evening for some of our young families.
- A congregation that has given nearly \$25,000 this year toward benevolence needs in our community through our Benevolence offering.
- A couple that provides multiple weekly Bible studies and visits at various senior care centers, and constant care for our homebound.

When this congregation from different races, different cultures, different political ideologies, and different financial means comes together, extraordinary things happen – not just for the recipient of the generosity but as much so for those giving. God invites us to be active participants in a larger story of hope and redemption. God includes us in something greater than ourselves. We can be a community centered around generosity – generosity of resources, and love and grace. This congregation is our very own insta-familia, a community of hope-dealers.

The thing about being hope-dealers is this – you become hope-receivers at the same time. This is the gift of generosity. Generosity does more than meet needs. It transforms those who practice it.

This week, our budget proposal for the new year will be sent out to our church family. Included in that mailing is an invitation to give now and a commitment card asking you to prayerfully consider what you will give in the new year as we continue to partner together and with God. God is inviting us to participate in a story greater than ourselves, to be a community of hope dealers through generous living. We are each other's harvest. We are each other's business. We are each other's magnitude and bond.

¹ From *The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks* (Library of America 2005). Copyright © 1970 by Gwendolyn Brooks. Reprinted with the consent of Brooks Permissions. Originally published in *Family Pictures* (1971) and collected in the Freedomways anthology, *Paul Robeson, The Great Forerunner* (International Publishers 1998) and in *Blacks*, the collected poetry of **Gwendolyn Brooks** (Third World Press 1994).