

Ruth and Stone Soup
Based on Ruth 3-4 and Mark 12
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What does stone soup have to do with the story of the book of Ruth? In the book of Ruth, everyone has a little bit of something, even though Naomi thinks she's got a whole lot of nothing. She tells Ruth to go home, go back to her family—I got nothing, she says to her. I have no son and no husband with whom I could make a son, and I have no money or even food for myself, so if you stay with me, we'll both starve. Go home, go away. But Ruth disagrees. You do have something, she says, you have me. Naomi seems to like Ruth, but realistically, she doesn't think Ruth counts for all that much at this point. So she's not thrilled. But she stops arguing.

As it turns out, when they get back to Bethlehem, it takes Naomi, and Ruth, and Boaz, and the whole countryside's barley harvest to get something good to happen for all of them. Ruth needs Naomi to tell her where to go and what to do. She needs Naomi to tell her—Boaz is somebody you need to get to know, and this is how you should go about it. And of course Naomi needs Ruth because Naomi's too old even to go out and glean the barley from the fields, let alone to go after Boaz herself. And they both need Boaz, because they have nothing to eat, but Boaz has plenty. The women have no husband or sons, but Boaz can be the husband and make the son. They need to survive themselves and to keep their husband's family name alive, and Boaz has everything they need to make that happen—including the need in his life for a good woman. Or two. In fact, the needs of Naomi and Ruth—for support, for a husband--connect with the needs of Boaz—for a wife and a family. That connection of needs makes good things happen.

The story of Ruth getting together with Boaz and having a son and saving Naomi from shame, poverty, and loneliness, all of that only happens in this story because of a kind of charity. Naomi and Ruth have nothing when they come back to Bethlehem. No husbands to protect them, no money, no family, and most urgently, no food. But they're in luck, or else they have a kind of plan, because they come back right at the barley harvest. And there's a law in ancient Israel that says when it's harvest time, and you're out harvesting grain, you should leave a little behind for poor people to come and pick up. There's even a law that says you cut the corners, round off the corners when you harvest, and you leave those triangles of grain in the corners of the field for poor people who have no land and so no grain and no food of their own. That's what Naomi sends Ruth out to do in the barley fields. To walk behind the paid workers, picking up whatever grain they leave behind. Maybe to dig into those unharvested corners, if some other poor soul hasn't gotten there first. Charity. Ruth is a charity case, Naomi is dependent on Ruth. Naomi sends Ruth out to get the unemployment check, to pick up the food stamps, that are going to feed them both.

And not only is Ruth a charity case, she's also a foreigner. She's not a Hebrew, she's not an Israelite. The law about leaving the corners unharvested and letting the poor people pick what they can—that law is really meant to feed the poor of Israel. It's not meant to

feed the Mexicans coming over the border because of the poverty and famine in their own homeland. But Ruth is that Mexican, coming over the border with nothing at all but her friendship to her mother-in-law, hoping that the charity of the place is big enough to feed them both.

A couple things make Ruth's evening encounter with Boaz a little shady. Naomi's not stupid. She doesn't suggest that Ruth just go talk to Boaz. She tells her, wash and anoint yourself, put on your best clothes, then wait until he's eaten and had plenty to drink, and then go to him. When women bathe and put their best clothes on in the Bible, someone's likely to end up married or dead within a chapter. You never hear a man in the Bible being told, Now make yourself up real pretty before you go and talk to the king... But Naomi and Ruth's one little resource is whatever beauty or physical attraction Ruth can offer Boaz. It's kind of awful, because Ruth is being put in this really kind of dangerous situation—go at night and make it clear to this man how attractive and available you are. But Naomi's not wrong to do it—after all, it's their only shot at surviving, longterm.

This is biblical ethics, which we may want to take a serious look at before we claim it as our own. It's not exactly that the end justifies the means. But when it comes to the interests of life—your own life, your family's life, and the life of your people—when it comes to the interests of life, you do what you have to do. Like Naomi, you use every last resource that comes to hand, even when you seem to have no resources at all. Just like making stone soup. Put what you have into the pot, even when you don't seem to have anything at all.

When it comes to life, the life of your family, the life of your people, you do what you have to do. The only question is, who is our family? Who are our people? If each of us is looking out only for our own family, or even for our own kind, if each of us is looking out only for people like us, then we're all going to be in trouble. That kind of thinking would have sent Ruth, the unknown, un-believing foreigner, right back to Moab to starve. Naomi would have starved too, of course. And Boaz would have had no children. And King David never would have been born. Not to mention Jesus. In the end the longterm, really long term, interests of Israel depended on charity to a starving foreigner. The interests of our people depended on changing the definition of who "our people" were.

When the scribe asks Jesus what the most important commandment is, he does not hesitate to answer: "The first is, Love God. Love God real good. Love God with all you've got." and the second is "love your neighbor as you do yourself." Those are the top two, he says. Love God. And love your neighbor. Simple enough. Trouble is, God does not specify *which* neighbor. Let me tell you about my neighbors, my literal neighbors. Next door, there's Fred, a widower who's been living in that house for fifty years, kind elderly gentleman. On the other side is the young couple living with her mom, and their three young kids and two elderly dogs; then there's the black family with two college-age children across the street who seem to do nothing in their spare time but meticulously wash their cars. Those are literally my neighbors. Your neighbors might look more like each other, and like you, than mine do. Or they might not. Jesus in citing this commandment, didn't specify which neighbors should be loved—The young loud ones or the old quiet ones? The ones who mow their lawn every five minutes or the ones

who barely even have a lawn? the obsessively neat and tidy African American ones or the sloppy borderline white trash white ones? Do I really have to love our old neighbors up the street who used to complain that my pumpkin vines were touching his car? I would happily lay my life on the line for my people, do whatever was required for them to survive and thrive--as long as I get to define who my people are, who's in the group and who I never have to talk to again.

Love your neighbor. And here's the thing—you might choose your friends, but you do not get to choose your neighbors. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is asked, but who is my neighbor? And he answers with the story of the Good Samaritan, a story that suggests that even when we have every right to hate and fear our neighbors, we are still expected to love them, to heal them, to feed and clothe and house and care for them, to spend our good hard-earned money on them.

Ruth and Naomi's friendship is unlikely; everything about this story is unlikely. Unlikeliest of all is that these two women who have nothing, who are starving, one of whom is not even an Israelite, would end up full and happy and raising a son, a son who in the end will bring the people a king, and much later, the messiah. But stone soup is an unlikely concoction. It requires people looking out for one another. It requires many people seeing that even though they seem to have nothing, they still have something important to give. It requires that the Samaritan, the Moabite, and the Mexican be welcomed to the table God provides. Stone soup is a group effort—we can make it happen, but only by working together, only by connecting our needs so that we feed one another. We can make a pot of good soup, or a family, or even a kingship out of nothing, but only when we begin to see that what we have is not really nothing at all.