

God Works Through Human Ingenuity

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Ruth

The characters' ingenuity in the book of Ruth moves the story towards its happy conclusion. Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth each display ingenuity that honors God and furthers God's purposes.

Boaz was a successful landowner who defied contemporary expectations by standing up for the vulnerable worker in his midst.

Indeed Boaz may have enacted the world's earliest recorded anti-sexual harassment policy. Boaz made the terms of this policy clear to his workers. They were not to "bother" Ruth (Ruth 2:9). The word *naga* literally means not "to touch" her, but here it functions more generally to mean not "to harass, take advantage of, or mistreat."

The regular employees were to make Ruth's work environment as secure as possible and to go out of their way to assist her in achieving her tasks. In the workplace, prevention of harassment means not only creating a safe environment, but a productive one for those at risk. Barriers to productivity, advancement, and their attendant rewards must be eliminated.

Boaz could have made Ruth safe by keeping her at a great distance from the male workers. But this would have denied her access to water and food, and may have caused loss of grain due to wind or animals before she could gather the sheaves. Boaz made sure that the safeguards he created enabled her to be fully productive.

Boaz' workers seemed to catch his generous spirit. When their boss greeted them with a blessing, they blessed him in return. This atmosphere of blessing extended to the foreigner in their midst. Not only did they cut a lot of grain for Ruth, they also accepted this Moabite woman as a co-worker for the duration of the harvest.

It takes ingenuity to create an honest, successful business amidst a corrupt culture. Yet all leaders—indeed all workers—have the power to shape the culture in which they work. Boaz modeled fair treatment. The harvest supervisor enacted egalitarian practices despite living in a society shot through with misogyny and racism. Although we may think that we are constrained by our culture to conform to unfair, meaningless, or unproductive ways of working, in reality the way we work profoundly influences others.

Naomi displayed ingenuity by instigating the courtship between Boaz and Ruth. She pushed the bounds of convention by sending Ruth to Boaz's threshing floor in the middle of the night to "uncover his feet and lie down" (Ruth 3:4). Her plan was risky. The location of the encounter suggests the actions of a prostitute. A morally noble man like Boaz might be expected to send such a woman away. And yet Naomi's plan worked.

Ruth's request that Boaz marry her is similarly bold. She was a foreigner propositioning an Israelite; a woman propositioning a man; a young person propositioning an older person; and a destitute field worker propositioning a rich landowner. Ruth went against custom and displayed her own ingenuity.

Instead of taking offense at Ruth's forwardness, Boaz blessed her, praised her for her commitment to the well-being of her family, and pronounced her a noble woman.

The story ends happily with Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi all rewarded for their ingenuity and receiving God's favor.

The book of Ruth presents a powerful story of God at work, directing events from all sides to take care of his people, and more importantly, to accomplish his purposes. Faithfulness—both God’s faithfulness to people and people’s faithfulness to God—is enacted through work and its resulting fruitfulness. The characters in the book of Ruth work diligently and with ingenuity. They recognize the image of God in their fellow human beings. Through their work, they accomplish God’s purposes.

We live out our faithfulness to God when we work diligently for the good of other people. Through our work, God can accomplish his purposes in the world. With our ingenuity at work, we can bring glory to God and serve the world in which we live. This gives dignity to our work, whatever that work may be.