

“What if we were Ruthless?”

31 October 2021: 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

SUMC—Salado, TX 76571

Preaching Text: Ruth 1:1-22

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“When you’re part of a team, you stand up for your teammates. Your loyalty is to them. You protect them through good and bad, because they’d do the same for you”—Yogi Berra (1925 -2015).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

[1:1] In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. [2] The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. [3] But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. [4] These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, [5] both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[6] Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. [7] So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. [8] But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. [9] The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. [10] They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." [11] But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? [12] Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for

me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, [13] would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." [14] Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

[15] So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." [16] But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

[17] Where you die, I will die--
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

[18] When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

[19] So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" [20] She said to them,

"Call me no longer Naomi,

call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
[21] I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

[22] So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:1-22).

Do you remember being the last one chosen? Whether we are the best athlete or the most popular person in a group, there are times when we are new. We are new because we have not proved our skills. Like it or not, there are times when we are the last chosen. If not the last chosen, then at least overlooked for advancement—a promotion we feel best qualified to assume. When people overlook us, it produces stinging feelings. Perhaps these feelings seized Ruth as she offered to accompany her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem after a series of family tragedies.

Ruth's story occurs in the time of the Judges before the Lord God established Israel's monarchy. Elimelech ("My God is King") married Naomi ("Pleasant") and because of Judah's famine, moves Naomi and sons, Mahlon ("Sickness") and Chilion ("Spent") to Moab for food. Previously, there had been antagonism between Israel and Moab. We see why when we read in Genesis the story of Lot and his daughters. Lot's daughters feared that they would not find husbands to produce children. Thus, Lot's daughters make Lot drunk and beget their children. Genesis recounts:

Thus, both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites (Genesis 19:36-38).

Israel refused to tolerate a people produced by incestuous trysts. Yet, Moab had the food Judah did not . . . so on to Moab.

In time, Elimelech died and his sons took Moabite wives. Orpah (“Back of the Neck”) and Ruth (“Friend” or “Companion”) were the wives’ names. The story tells us that each of the young men died as their father before them. This fact left Naomi with her two Moabite daughters-in-law. The biblical book of Ruth relates the plight of three widows who had no legal standing. They were women without a man to provide for them or speak for them—as was the day’s practice. Without a man, these women faced dire conditions. They were susceptible from a number of predatory scenarios.

In due course Naomi returned to Bethlehem and urged the daughters-in-law to go back to their families in Moab. Orpah needed some convincing from Naomi, but finally returned to her people. Yet, Ruth stuck by Naomi. The older widow could not shake Ruth. In fact, our lesson today recounts a speech Ruth makes as she refuses to abandon Naomi. Listen to these familiar words of loyalty and faithfulness, yet too often misconstrued in context in contemporary wedding covenant services:

But Ruth said,

Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,
if even death parts me from you (Ruth 1:16-17)!

Israel considers Ruth a foreign wife. Later, Israelite history regards persons such as Ruth as having no standing. For example, we read in Ezra this indictment of foreign wives: “Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (Ezra 10:11). Again, Ezra speaks to Israelites: “Let our officials represent the whole assembly, and let all in our towns who have taken foreign wives come at appointed times, and with them the elders and judges of every town, until the fierce wrath of our God on this account is averted from us” (Ezra 10:14). It is in such prejudice, while not yet codified in law but still a common Israelite bias, Ruth makes her declaration.

When we read Ruth’s story it is possible and seemingly natural to put ourselves in Ruth’s shoes. We perhaps wrongly believe that this story of Ruth advocates that we should offer loyalty and loving-kindness to others. Yet, the Bible includes Ruth to remind us that we are not like Ruth, but too often like Naomi.

The text tells us that Naomi says to her Bethlehem neighbors, “Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (1:20). Naomi is an embittered woman for life has nearly crushed her spirit. It is easy to identify with Ruth, but difficult to imagine we are more like Naomi, bitter and resentful for what God has dealt her.

Ruth is comparable to Luke’s Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-42). She stands outside, looking in. Ruth is not regarded as one of God’s chosen people. Yet, she continues establishing a relationship with one who would turn her away. Ruth remains steadfast and relentless. She never quits. Even as an outsider, Ruth continues to present herself as one who displays absolute kindness.

In fact, for while Naomi in her self-confessed bitterness may not deserve Ruth’s gracious company, Ruth even so offers Naomi gracious companionship—no strings attached whatsoever. In this sense, Ruth

is like God and Naomi is akin to us. Ruth is steadfast in her mission to create a solid bond with her mother-in-law. Ruth is, in the best sense, “a covenant maker.”

Ruth’s finest trait is that she never gives up. She pursued a bond with her mother-in-law long after most people would have surrendered. After Ruth’s husband dies, death severs all legal kinship ties between Naomi and Ruth. Yet, Ruth knows the secret to influencing people—she continues to build rapport. Ruth knows that relationship building is a key to persuade people.

This is what God does for those who follow God’s leadership. God continues to come to us in varied ways. The book of Hebrews opens with a superb portrayal of God: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Ruth knew that relationship building is key to any influence with people. A few years ago, I understand our congregation read Bishop Schnase’s book *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*. These five practices are:

radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development,
risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity

Ruth knew that relationship building offers influence and generous connections between people. Ruth was hospitable and full of extravagant generosity. To be the person God calls us to be, perhaps we could look to Ruth as a model of how we care for those like Naomi and others who are troubled. Jesus calls us to care for the Naomi(s) of the world.

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