

Love and Loyalty, Full and Empty

August series: The Book of Ruth – Full, Empty, Full

Ruth 1 (selected verses)

August 7, 2022

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

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.... But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May God deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ...Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

....Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 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...."

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.... 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 (selected verses)

One of my favorite books of the Bible is Ruth because it is about relationships, about a mother and sons and daughters-in-law, about family of origin and families of choice. It is a story about love, loss, a family with lots of problems, and rebellious children and tensions in a family. In short, these are ordinary people. Maybe a family like yours and mine. Sometimes it is tough to be a family and keep liking and loving each other.

Our story is set in the time of judges in Israel, when according to the book of Judges, "every one did what was right in his or her own eyes." (Judges 21:25) There is violence in the streets, corruption in government and people desperate for food and work. Clearly it was a tough time for marriage, tough on children, hard to be a family.

There some interesting themes throughout the book of Ruth, some opposites that play off of each other – life and death, full and empty, hope and despair, famine and food. And it is a story of redemption.

The setting is Bethlehem which in Hebrew means “house of bread.” But there is no bread in Bethlehem.

Naomi and her husband Elimelech decide to leave their home in Bethlehem and travel to the wilds of Moab to find food, the possibility of life instead of death. Have you ever had to move your family to find work, to find a house, to start a new life that was better even though the place you were going had its own problems?

Moab was a rough out of the way place. You don’t want to go there unless you have to. It was a place referred to like – moving to Timbuktu or Siberia or in California maybe Weed, or Hemet. Moab got its name from an incident recorded in the book of Genesis. Moabites were considered outsiders, unclean, and unacceptable to God because the daughters had violated the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

But there was food in Moab. And Naomi and her husband are desperate. They take their sons and move to Moab. And wouldn’t you know it? No sooner did their sons reach dating age that they start dating a couple of Moabite girls. Those must have been some interesting conversations with their sons.

While they are living in Moab, the worst possible thing that could happen happens. Elimelech dies. Now Naomi’s security and place in the world become very shaky. She is a widow with no man for protection or security. And she is a single parent. A few months later, Naomi has herself two Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Then ten years later the worst possible thing happened to Naomi again. Both her sons die. This leaves her a widow in a foreign country with no way to support herself and two daughters-in-law. Her life is empty.

So Naomi does the reasonable thing. She decides to return to her homeland, and to talk to Ruth and Orpah about going back to their homes. Basically she says “Ruth and Orpah, I’m going back to Bethlehem, back to my people. I am a widow with no prospect for another marriage, no way to have a life, no way to have a future.”

They all weep together. At first both daughters in law say they will return with Naomi. Orpah makes a valid choice –to return to her family. But Ruth clings to Naomi. It is the same Hebrew word here that is used in Genesis to describe marriage. “A man will cling to his wife and they will become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24) And Ruth clung to Naomi. (Ruth 1:14)

Ruth responds to Naomi’s pleading with one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible.

“Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you;
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge
Your people will be my people and your God, my God
Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried.”

This passage is often used at weddings but it is actually a commitment between two women. Naomi has taught Ruth about Yahweh, about the God of Israel and now Ruth wants to worship God. Naomi's Shabbat practices, reading Torah. Naomi has been a witness to her faith. Ruth has experienced the Holy One in presence of this Jewish family, at home with them.

When Naomi realizes that Ruth has made up her mind, she is less than thrilled to return to Bethlehem with this young woman whom others will see as foreign, unclean, an outsider. Ruth and Naomi arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest. There is hope Yet, Naomi's emptiness and grief overwhelm her. She calls to her friends, "Don't call me Naomi (meaning pleasant) but call me Mara (bitter.) or as my Old Testament Professor Johanna Bos accurately translated, "Don't call me Sweetie. Call me Sourpuss for God has dealt bitterly with me."

What do we do when life is unfair? Do we yell at someone? Do we eat too much? Drink too much? Sleep too much? Do those things make the situation better? What are the better ways to handle disappointment and anger? Naomi was willing to be honest with her anger at God. She was mad. She was sad. And she let people know.

Ruth and Naomi had to find a way to live, to survive. There were few options open to two widows, especially when one was a foreigner. So they did the only thing they could. They enrolled in the Israelite welfare system called gleaning. You will hear that story next week.

Our whole story of Ruth today centers around a huge reality that is described with a Hebrew word for which we have no English equivalent. That word "Hesed." Hesed shows up all throughout all over this book, actually. (1)

So, what does Hesed mean? It has sometimes been translated as "mercy", and certainly that's a part – that undeserved forgiveness, compassion and grace – but mercy doesn't nearly capture it, Hesed is more mutual, more communal than mercy.

Another way it's been translated is lovingkindness. And yes, it feels like kindness, And undoubtedly it is full of love. Hesed is more intimate than kindness and deeper bond than our overused word of love. It has also been translated as loyalty. And this gets even closer, because it is a "through thick and thin", "no matter what" kind of faithfulness and constancy. But loyalty can be exclusive, and Hesed is broad and inclusive. It spreads wider and deeper as it reaches out, bringing others, and still others.

One might even try calling it "Friendship," Friendship as chosen love and commitment. Generous, really seeing another and desiring their best, choosing to be with and for them, sacrificing yourself even, for their well-being. Hesed is like friendship, but deeper, thicker, richer, it is what gives friendship its strength and its depth.

Perhaps the best way to think about Hesed is something like “belongingness”. It is the inner logic and substance of belonging. Think of belonging as a verb, as action as well as an adjective and description. It looks like compassion, mercy and loyalty, lovingkindness and friendship. It looks like choosing over and over again to be there with and for this other, no matter what and without end. “The Hesed of the Lord never ceases, God’s Hesed never comes to an end.” (Lamentations 3:22)

Hesed says, I will go there with you. Hesed forgives. It hopes. It prays. Our human experiences give us a taste of the holy belonging to the Holy One, the source of love.

Ruth should have stayed with her people. Started her life over. That was the wise thing, the right thing to do. But instead she let her life be enveloped and driven by Hesed. She stayed with Naomi. What could she do for Naomi, really? She had nothing to give, she was not a man, she had no standing or property or means of support – nothing. She could do absolutely nothing for Naomi but be with her, share her position, her journey, her currently miserable lot in life. She could give Naomi Belongingness. She could join her in Hesed.

“Where you go I will go, your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God, and when you die they will bury me beside you.”

What kind of relationships have we had with that kind of love, that kind of loyalty? It is rare. It is a gift. It is hard work to maintain relationships. How can we as be open to and encourage each other to build loving, healthy relationships rooted in Hesed?

In days when there is so much that is fractured in relationships and body politic

I want to remember

We belong to God eternity and in the moment

We belong to the whole of creation

To the human family in all its rich complexity

To groups of language and history and culture

To places of towns, tribes, nations

To people in circles where we learn and where we work and where we express joys & hobbies

To ancestors, from the people from whom we come

To partners and children and friends and pets

To this church - a community of pilgrims and learners and seekers and friends

who gather and pray and serve and come to the table and go out
to offer hesed, lovingkindness to the world.

May this deeper belonging, Hesed, sustain us, comfort us and challenge us. Amen.

1) Rev. Kara Root, “The Inner Language of God’s Life,” 9/20/15

<https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2015/09/jan-richardsons-best-supper-available.html>