



Ruth

Week 4

Lori Lampert - 02/27/2022

If you walked into our church from the east doors and looked to your right, you saw a beautiful room. Completed last year with the wonderful efforts of Paul and Loren and good old Dave the floor refinisher, it doubled the size of our gathering area. When we reopened it, we were able to spread out our tables and chairs and create social distance so we could once again enjoy the time before worship together and separately.

If you look in there now, you will see the beautifully finished fir floors that were actually the subflooring hidden beneath layers added over the years this part of the church has been around. Tar paper, covered by asbestos tile, covered by carpet, covered by plank flooring sat on top of this now gorgeous wood. Each layer served a purpose, once upon a time. The room was offices, classrooms, and most recently—when I began here in 2014—it had been redesigned to be a nursery. But then, the time came to ask what might we be able to do with this room today to serve the vision of our church to be a place where Christ and the community intersect.

So the task began to uncover what was beneath the top layer and discover what was beneath. The conversations began around what we should put down next. New carpet? Hardwood? Another type of tile? But when all was removed, the beauty of the subfloor was discovered, and work began to

reclaim what had been lost, to give new meaning to this old room, and most importantly provide another much needed space for The Downtown Church to offer to our community for meetings.

This room has served as a place for our Sunday morning class, funeral meals, board meetings for our neighbors the Child Advocacy Center, a planning day for our neighbors at Pitts Chapel, an emergency temporary classroom for our neighbors at the Discovery center, and a teaching center for Good Dads. All have taken place on a subfloor, a foundation, that had been hidden for years.

The book of Ruth is a wonderful reminder of the foundation that God set since the beginning of time. It reveals to us the way humanity is meant to treat one another. It is the subfloor our denominationalism, doctrines, and even our liturgical traditions have covered over. Each layer is meant to serve another purpose, but in fact often covers up what is not to be hidden—God's *hesed*, grace and lovingkindness. And our commandment, as followers of Jesus Christ, is to be bearers of that foundational *hesed* as we intentionally live the gospel, loving God and loving neighbor.

I think it is important to know where you will find the book of Ruth. This small, four chapter story is placed in Holy Scripture between the book of Judges and the book of 1 Samuel. It is a linchpin between the layers of history when judges were the authority for the Hebrews and what would become the rule of kings.

It is as if the people of God were being called to stop before they move on in telling their story to remember who God is. Before they put layer upon layer of more wars and more divisions and more rules and more human authority, they are to tell this tale, remember the truth that God is *hesed*, and let it form their decisions and plans for the future.

Today, as we conclude our time in the book of Ruth, we are going to look at the three main characters of this story: Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Naomi, whose almost unbearable grief is given new meaning and a new beginning. Ruth, who takes loyalty and love to a level that could cost her everything but instead gives her a hope and a future. Boaz, the righteous man of God who is willing to rethink and reinterpret the letter of the law to bring about the spirit of the law.

Each of these people are redeemed. Each of these people receive God's *hesed*, and each of these people extend *hesed* to another. They are used by God to build a foundation that culminates in the ultimate descendant of Ruth, Jesus of Nazareth. And each of these people have a unique perspective that holds up a mirror to you and me and helps us choose to live out the gospel.

Naomi. Her name means *pleasant*, but upon her return to Bethlehem a decade after leaving, she has changed her name to Mara, *bitter*. And rightly so. She left Bethlehem in the midst of a famine with her husband Elimelech and her two sons. She comes back after all three have died and without even a male heir. Neither of her Moabite daughters-in-law have produced what is most valued in this culture: a male to carry on the family legacy and care for her.

Naomi's grief is very real and will never go away. We know this. Any of us who have ever suffered the loss of a loved one know this. The pain diminishes, we move forward, but we are different because of what we now know. There is a great cost to love.

Naomi demonstrates what many of us do in the midst of our grief, she rails against God. And maybe that is why we can see ourselves in Naomi so clearly. In this story she exhibits and speaks of her anger, her frustration, her

grief. She turns her back on God and clearly blames God for all that she has endured. Yet, God has not turned away from her. God is with her, and God has provided a way where there seems to be no way. When Ruth returns from gleaning in the fields of Boaz with an abundance of barley, Naomi remembers what she knew to be true. God is *hesed*, and she proclaims.

Ruth 2:20

Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, “Why, God bless that man! God hasn’t quite walked out on us after all! He still loves us, in bad times as well as good!” Naomi went on, “That man, Ruth, is one of our circle of covenant redeemers, a close relative of ours!”

A light has come back to Naomi. In the midst of her grief she is able to see God is still working. God is still faithful. God still loves her and Ruth. As the barley season comes to a close, Naomi is also able to see beyond her own need and think of Ruth, Ruth’s future. What does it hold? They are caught in a patriarchal society. What will be her life without a husband?

In an extraordinary turn in this story, these two women, Naomi and Ruth will take into their own hands their future. Naomi gives Ruth a plan that may give her a new life. Knowing what is true about God, knowing what they have learned about the generosity and kindness of Boaz, knowing what is true about this culture they live in, they trust in God’s *hesed*. By the end of the story, Naomi’s pain and suffering is redeemed.

Ruth. Her name means *friend*, and from the beginning of the book to the end we see Ruth model *hesed*. She leaves her land, her family and walks with Naomi to Bethlehem. She stands beside Naomi in their shared grief over the death of Naomi’s son, Ruth’s husband. Ruth goes into the field of Boaz to glean, to provide food for them with the work of her hands. There is no

complaining in Ruth, there is no “poor me,” or even deep sighs of exhaustion or loneliness. She presses on, day after day.

When Naomi proposes a plan for her future that involves ending her mourning, dressing and perfuming herself, and laying at the feet of Boaz in the middle of the night, I find it remarkable that we don't have in this story Ruth speaking a single “Yes, but.” Yes, but you know I could be shamed and rejected. Yes, but you know I could be raped. Yes, but you know this is setting me up for possible stoning right? Instead, Ruth says, once again as she did when leaving the land of Moab and walking into an unknown future, “I'll go.” This is the challenge Ruth gives to us. And I want to be clear. It's not that no matter what, we do what our mother-in-law says. It's not that *anyone* is to be given authority over our bodies, male or female.

There is a part of this story I want to remind us of once again. Remember that rich, powerful Boaz could have taken Ruth at any time he wanted to in this culture. No one would have batted an eye if he had decided to use her, possess her, and then cast her aside. All along, he could have grabbed her out of the field. Yet this is a story of how God functions in this world, and how God is calling us to live. Between the judges and kings stands Ruth. When Ruth says “I'll go,” she is trusting in God's *hesed*, God's mercy, God's love. And she too, by the end of the story, will be redeemed.

Boaz. His name means “strength is within him.” He is part of the same tribe of Naomi's husband Elimelech, but not directly what is called a kinsman redeemer. In the law is a provision that if a man is poor and can no longer afford his own land, a kinsman is to buy it to keep it in the tribe. If a man dies and leaves no heirs, his closest relative is to marry the widow and any children born to them will inherit the land of the deceased father.

We know that Boaz is a righteous man, following the laws of God for he has provided for the poor in his fields. We know he is generous and kind from the way he has protected and provided for Ruth and in turn Naomi. There are scholars who also believe he has no children, but probably other wives. There is another law for Boaz to consider when confronted with what to do with Ruth, the widow from Moab. It comes from **Deuteronomy 23: No Ammonite or Moabite is to enter the congregation of God, even to the tenth generation, nor any of his children, ever. Those nations didn't treat you with hospitality on your travels out of Egypt...** What will Boaz do with all his power?

This is a story of how God works in this world and how we are to live. Boaz is a righteous man when he sends Ruth home, and he immediately sets to work to honor her request that he "spread his cloak over her" which is a euphemism for marriage. He is a righteous man when he seeks out the closer kinsman and negotiates to step in to buy Elimelech's land and marry Ruth. He is a righteous man when he understands that the letter of the law is not always the spirit of the law. For Ruth is a child of the God he worships. Ruth is poor, a foreigner, caring for a widowed mother-in-law. Ruth may be barren herself, for after 10 years of marriage she has no child. The story over and over reminds us Ruth is a Moabite, an outcast. Yet, watch what God will do.

Ruth 4:13

Boaz married Ruth. She became his wife. Boaz slept with her. By God's gracious gift she conceived and had a son. ¹⁴⁻¹⁵ The town women said to Naomi, "Blessed be God! He didn't leave you without family to carry on your life. May this baby grow up to be famous in Israel! He'll make you young again!"

He'll take care of you in old age. And this daughter-in-law who has brought him into the world and loves you so much, why, she's worth more to you than seven sons!"

¹⁶ Naomi took the baby and held him in her arms, cuddling him, cooing over him, waiting on him hand and foot. ¹⁷ The neighborhood women started calling him "Naomi's baby boy!" But his real name was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

When all the layers of this story are pulled back. When everything else is removed. The foundational truth that we are meant to learn is the enormity of God's *hesed*. It is God's grace, God's mercy, God's love, that saves us. Redemption comes from God. God is the glue that holds all these layers together.

God is moving through and in Naomi and Boaz. God is working in the hospitality extended to Elimelech's family in Moab and the acceptance of Ruth in Bethlehem. God does not forget the good Ruth is doing nor the pain Naomi has suffered. God's *hesed* holds them together, moves them forward, redeems their lives.

The book of Ruth is preserved for all time so that God's people, you and I, never forget that the greatest king of Israel, David, is descended from an outcast named Ruth. In the lineage of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is a person who we would expect would have no standing. We would assume in a patriarchal society she would have no voice, no agency of her own. And yet, here she is.

I picture her standing on the firm, beautiful foundation that is God's *hesed*. Standing with Boaz on one side and Naomi, the doting grandmother, on the other, with Obed in her arms. I picture her looking out over the vastness of

time at you and me and saying, in Hebrew with a Moabite accent, "Never forget what God can do."

Let's pray: Almighty God, we confess we have covered the foundational truth of your great love and *hesed*. We have put restrictions and laws in place to keep people out instead of seeking to extend the same mercy and redemption we have received from you. Help us O Lord to participate in the gospel of Jesus by loving you and our neighbor and never forgetting what you Lord God can and will do. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.