



Ruth

Week 2

Lori Lampert - 02/13/2022

There is a line from a 1914 poem by Robert Frost that was rattling around in my head as I thought about the story of Ruth and Naomi. I'm not sure when I learned it, but I have held it in my heart for years. **"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."**

The poem is called *The Death of the Hired Man*. It tells of a man named Silas, who is at the end of his life, and with nowhere else he feels welcome, he makes his way back to the home of Warren and Mary. A place he once had food and shelter. A place he called home.

The quote is being spoken by Warren as Silas has come back to them once again. Mary and Warren aren't his family—there is no reason for them to be kind, other than the fact this is a person in need, and they can meet that need. They don't have to. They can turn him away. There is no reason to take him in and provide Silas a home. As a matter of fact, we learn in the poem that Silas has a brother down the road with resources. Silas has disappointed them before, leaving them in the lurch with work. Silas struggled to get along with another on the crew. Yet, Mary wants Warren to be kind to him. To be his home.

The reason I believe this line has been running through my mind is because the book of Ruth is about this type of kindness. The Hebrew word is *hesed*. And some scholars say there really isn't an equivalent word in English. It's translated as loving kindness, mercy, steadfastness, and even love. The closest word we often understand for *hesed* is grace, unmerited favor.

I like how theologian and author Carolyn Custis James defines it:

"Hesed is the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning—the 'love-your-neighbor as yourself' brand of living, an active, selfless, sacrificial caring for one another that goes against the grain of our fallen natures.

Two parties are involved—someone in desperate need and a second person who possesses the power and the resources to make a difference. *Hesed* is driven by a loyal, selfless love that motivates a person to do voluntarily what no one has a right to expect or ask of them. It's actually the kind of love we find most fully expressed in Jesus. In a nutshell, *hesed* is the gospel lived out." Carolyn Custis James

Hesed. It is woven into the book of Ruth, and we begin to see it unfold in the rest of chapter one, that we are going to look at today.

A quick recap, because so much happened in the first five verses. Elimelech and Naomi emigrated to an enemy region, Moab, with their two sons due to a famine in Judah. Elimelech dies. The sons marry Moabite wives, and after ten years the sons die without any children. There are no men left in Naomi's family, no male heirs from her sons to give her—or her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth—any value in this patriarchal world.

Naomi finds herself on the bottom rung of society's ladder. Nothing left for her. This is when I think of these words: **“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”** And I wonder, is this how Naomi feels as she learns there is now food back home? Bethlehem, which means the house of bread, has bread once more. Somehow, someday she must make her way back home.

Naomi is going home. Orpah and Ruth are leaving theirs. Naomi is going back where she speaks the language, she knows the customs, she understands the culture. Orpah and Ruth are heading into a foreign land where they are considered enemies of the people, where no one will be waiting to embrace them, where they have no protection.

They move together down the road, and it is as if for a moment Naomi has some clarity in her profound grief. Have you been there? Deep grief has a way of clouding our ability to focus and think beyond putting one foot in front of the other.

Naomi tells Orpah and Ruth to go back, back to Moab, back to their people. They are young. They could remarry and begin another life with a new family and a new home.

Orpah and Ruth refuse. Naomi tries again. Naomi wants what she believes is best for these women she calls her dear daughters. Go back home to the place they will take you in. Naomi says in verse 13:

“...this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.”¹⁴ Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.¹⁵ Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her.”

Orpah is doing nothing wrong by honoring Naomi's words. She is just going home. We can understand that right? Isn't that what Naomi is doing too? Going home. Yet, Ruth makes a different choice. One of *hesed*.

The following words have often been read at weddings. Marriage is meant to be about two people choosing to join together for the rest of their life. But that is not the context. These words are about *a person*, Ruth, reaching a fork in the road.

To the east is Moab. What she has always known. Where she grew up. Familiarity. East is a people who worship gods, idols that she has always known.

And then west. West means giving of herself to care for Naomi who has nothing to give back. West means standing beside a barren widow on the lowest rung of the ladder. West means wrapping her arms around Naomi and promising her bitter, grieving mother-in-law that she will not be alone. West is not the easier way or the certain way to a better life. There is danger on the road ahead, there is risk. West is not a simple path to choose, but it is the right path for Ruth. Her choice is Grace. *Hesed*.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But Ruth said, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!"

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ When Naomi saw that Ruth had her heart set on going with her, she gave in. And so the two of them traveled on together to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was soon buzzing: "Is this really our Naomi? And after all this time!"

²⁰⁻²¹ **But she said, “Don’t call me Naomi; call me Bitter. The Strong One has dealt me a bitter blow. I left here full of life, and God has brought me back with nothing but the clothes on my back. Why would you call me Naomi? God certainly doesn’t. The Strong One ruined me.”** ²² **And so Naomi was back, and Ruth the foreigner with her, back from the country of Moab. They arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.**

Hesed. Do you see it? Let me read again James’ definition:

“Hesed is driven by a loyal, selfless love that motivates a person to do voluntarily what no one has a right to expect or ask of them. It’s actually the kind of love we find most fully expressed in Jesus. In a nutshell, *hesed* is the gospel lived out.”

- Carolyn Custis James

Jesus walks up to a blind man and restores his sight. *Hesed*. Jesus speaks truth to people in power on behalf of a woman about to be stoned to death. *Hesed*. Jesus walks into the home of tax collectors and sinners, and by his very presence blessed them. *Hesed*. When a man is possessed with demons, Jesus speaks up and heals him. *Hesed*.

When the Roman guards are gambling for his robe, he speaks forgiveness. *Hesed*. And when you and I cannot redeem ourselves, when this broken world seems beyond ever becoming whole, when death appears to be winning? Jesus rises from the grave and defeats death. *Hesed*.

And good grief could we use a bit more *hesed* right now, couldn’t we? It seems more and more like there just won’t ever be enough to make a difference. As though acts of grace and words of love are overwhelmingly drowned out by all the shouting? Thank God that heaven is overflowing with *hesed*, and that Jesus is coming with more than enough for the entire world.

But there again, don't we pray every Sunday that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

Consider this sermon a plea for more *hesed*. For those of us who follow Jesus Christ to decide to live out the gospel of *hesed*. Living without expecting something in return. Doing for someone simply because you can, not because you have to, not because it is easy, but because it is the way of transforming this world.

Pay attention. Today. Tomorrow. This week. There will be someone walking in grief who is unable to think beyond taking the next step. Could you walk beside them for a bit? There is someone who truly believes the world has forgotten them. Would you call them?

The blood banks in our community and in our country are desperate for donors. Could you spare a pint? Our schools are needing substitutes and bus drivers. Maybe you could fill that need? There are nonprofits like the Council of Churches and Ozark Food Harvest that every single day make a difference in the lives of the hungry, the unsheltered. Would you share your resources with them?

And I would be remiss if I didn't ask you to receive from God, who *is* *hesed*, the gift that is always extended to you.

Forgiveness is yours no matter the sin. *Hesed*. Love is yours no matter how you are feeling about yourself. *Hesed*. The knowledge that the Creator of the Universe will always be with you through all of life's ups and downs. *Hesed*. And the care that God will show by bringing alongside you, people to offer you companionship for the journey. *Hesed*.

Hesed. Choosing to go west when east might be easier. Choosing to open a door when it would be so much simpler to keep it closed. Choosing to be the place, the home, where when someone has to go there, you take them in.

Let's pray. Lord, every day we stand at the crossroads. We can choose to follow you, or not. We can decide to hear the cries of the hurting, the hungry, the lonely and move toward them with *hesed*, or not. It's risky to ask, Lord, but will you open our hearts a little wider today and make our vision a little clearer so that we can honor you and live the gospel of your son Jesus Christ? In whose name we pray. Amen.