

The Book of Ruth

A brief reflection on biblical literalism, redemption,
patriarchy & feminism, loyally faithful relationships,
and the treatment of immigrants.

The Book of Ruth
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Dallas

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Today I have selected a biblical story that may be only slightly familiar to most folks. It's the Old Testament Book of Ruth. The entire book has only 85 verses contained in 4 chapters. Let me set the stage just a bit before we hear today's reading, which will cover most of this book.

Despite its title, the Book of Ruth primarily tells the story of a woman named Naomi who lived in Bethlehem in the time of the judges – around 1200 BCE, before the time of King David and the royal monarchy. A famine drives Naomi and her family to seek refuge in Moab, the country just to the east of Judah across the Jordan River and Dead Sea. While there, Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons marry Moabite women, but then both sons die before having children.

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, destitute, bitter, and "empty," but accompanied by her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. **Like the Good Samaritan in the gospel of Luke, Ruth is an admirable character from an ethnic group that was despised and rejected in ancient Israelite tradition.**

The story tells us that Ruth's loving kindness and extraordinary loyalty and faithfulness in her commitment to Naomi is the instrument that God uses to "redeem" Naomi through the birth of Ruth's child named Obed. It is Ruth's great-grandson who will become King David, whose lineage is later tied to Jesus of Nazareth.

So at this time a cast of characters including Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and a narrator will present a somewhat abridged version of the Book of Ruth.

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To do this story justice, as well as this congregation, there are five particular issues that I want to address. They are: biblical literalism, redemption, patriarchy and feminism, loyally faithful relationships, and the treatment of immigrants. (And yes, I will do all this in 15 minutes.)

I don't want to make too big a deal out of this, but quoting from *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, an authoritative Roman Catholic source: "**Most scholars agree that the Book of Ruth is fiction, a short story set in history.** Although the narrative is historically plausible – for centuries its literal truth went unchallenged – scholars have come to believe that the book is a literary creation which accomplishes several goals." We will take a look at those goals.

Concerning the issue of **redemption**, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* states:

This story is more like an extended parable than a historical report... **The parable-like form of the story encourages us to see not just that we ought to be like Ruth but that we are like Naomi.** Naomi is the character who most closely mirrors the attitudes and experiences of the people of God, including both Israel and the Christian church. Naomi is the one who needs redemption, and ultimately she receives it in the story. It is Naomi's life that is renewed; her feelings of bitterness, emptiness, and hopelessness are turned around.

Since redemption is not a reward given to Naomi because of her exemplary behavior, identification with her allows us as readers to hear the good news. Like Naomi, we are the recipients of unmerited love, and our redemption is due to someone else's faithfulness, [God's], not our own.

Another biblical commentary that I often refer to, especially when looking at stories where women are the main characters, is called *The Woman's Bible Commentary*. From it we gain a proper **feminist perspective** of this story when it rightly acknowledges the **patriarchal culture in which this story is set**. In reflecting upon this story, it states, "Women have a voice in the community, but that is all. Their fates [and security] are determined by men: their husbands and sons and the town elders... The book praises Ruth, but it [seems to] also preach that a women's principal worth is in producing sons, thus enabling the direct line of a man's inheritance."

While this is true in this ancient context, feminist theologian and biblical scholar Phyllis Trible enables us to see this book in a new light. As interpreted by Trible, **the Book of Ruth is the story of two brave and independent women struggling for survival in a male-dominated world.**

Naomi and Ruth know hardship, danger, insecurity, and death. They risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own survival in the midst of that which is foreign, hostile, and unknown. Ruth and Naomi are certainly, then, two of the greatest heroines to be found in scripture!

All this leads to one of the most important issues raised in this remarkable story, that of **loyally faithful relationships**. The theme and motivating force that permeates this story is best described by a Hebrew term: **hesed**. It is difficult to translate by just one English word. *Hesed* reflects the compassion, loving-kindness, grace and faithfulness that are part of God's nature. *Hesed* underlies the charitable, selfless acts of Ruth and Boaz that transform Naomi's life from one of empty despair to a fulfilled existence full of blessings. Ultimately, then, **this is a story of covenant relationships and fidelity.**

So one of the things that I would like for you to take away from this sermon is following two questions to reflect upon.

- How has your *hesed*, your loving kindness, and faithful loyalty beyond what is expected, led to wholeness and fulfillment in the life of another?
- Conversely, how has the loving kindness and faithful loyalty of another toward you led to wholeness and fulfillment in your life?

Now, in light of the conversation we had this morning during the Adult Church School hour concerning our Hispanic Ministry efforts here at College Hill, there's one more very important point that the Book of Ruth leads us to reflect upon – **the treatment of immigrants**. It's no accident that the biblical author spends a great deal of time reminding us that Naomi's ethnicity is Hebrew and **Ruth is from the country of Moab – a traditionally despised ethnic group of people as far as the Israelites are concerned**.

This should raise questions in our minds with regard to insider/outsider dynamics not only in Israel, but also in our own communities. **Who is “family,” and who is not?** Who is “foreign,” and who is not? How does an outsider become an insider? What are the rights, privileges, and the obligations shared by those who belong to the “insider” group?

We cannot leave a consideration of the Book of Ruth without asking what types of people in our society face the same kind of problems as Naomi and Ruth faced in the world they inhabited. In order to do that we need to ask, **Who in our society is forced by circumstances beyond their control to glean what they can from the bounty of others?** Who in our world has no choice but to live on what is left over after those in control of the basic resources for life have taken everything they want or need?

As modern readers, we must conclude that a “**widow**” is not merely a woman who has lost her husband but anyone in our society (male or female) who **has to rely on the charitable whims of others for food and shelter**. Furthermore, Naomi comes from and Ruth immigrates to a community in which foreigners (particularly foreign women) traditionally were viewed with suspicion, as a potential source of temptation to sin. We are constantly being reminded that the people of her new homeland held Ruth's ancestry and culture in contempt.

If ancient Israel had an official “immigration policy” in the time of the judges, undoubtedly Moabites would have been listed as “undesirable elements.” Moabites were even banned from the religious worshipping community because of their ancestor's sins. So in order to decide who corresponds to a “Moabite” in our society, we need to consider not just those who are strangers in our midst, but also those whom we have banned from the fellowship of worshipping Christians. Let me quote from the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*:

In modern times, ongoing debates over immigration laws indicate that many people feel burdened by the presence of foreigners in their midst – even if these outsiders profess undying allegiance to us and to our God, as Ruth did to Naomi. **The people in our congregations may find it hard to believe that refugees, immigrants, or people requesting political asylum might someday become the instruments of our redemption** [as Ruth was instrumental in Naomi's]. But there is no doubt that the biblical narrator pictures Ruth as an immigrant, entering the “promised land” from the same direction and for many of the same reasons as Naomi's [Hebrew] ancestors had done in previous generations.

Thus [we] need to consider some of the characteristics Ruth has in common with “outsiders” who are seeking entrance into our own country or into our communities today. For instance, it might be argued that Ruth came into Israel seeking (and finding) greater economic security than she

had in her native land. Impoverished Israelites may have complained that Ruth took work or resources away from the native poor of Bethlehem.

The author of this commentary, Kathleen A. Roberson Farmer, concludes with this comment, **“The dominant (insider) group needs constantly to be reminded that they can neither survive nor accomplish the mission to which they are called without the active assistance of “foreigners” in their midst.”** I know that I will be taking a good long look at the implications of that powerful statement, and I hope you will as well.

I'll close with a couple of more questions for you to ponder. Like Boaz, **do we worry that others would think less of us if we gave special favors to “foreigners” or “outsiders?”** What would people of Tulsa say if we, as upstanding citizens in the community, allowed an outsider – like Ruth, someone from a despised ethnic group, someone who has never before worked or paid taxes in our community – access to the “fields” that we have cultivated year after year? Would other poor people flock to our “fields” expecting the same?

Like Boaz and the reapers in the field, **we are forced by the Book of Ruth to question how we deal with the dispossessed and the powerless in our society.** Do we give them only pious words in response to their pleas instead of material relief for their needs? Do we allow those without resources of their own to “glean” only after we have taken everything we want from our “fields?” Do we give them only the leftovers that we, the insiders, do not want or do not want to bother with?

Are we reluctant to set aside perfectly good resources for their use, telling ourselves that they have not helped to “grow” or to “tend” them? I wonder if food pantries the modern equivalent of gleaning? What would be the modern equivalent of offering hospitality to an unknown foreigner?

Just something to think about as we ponder the lesson that can be gleaned from the Book of Ruth. So much for a seemingly simple story from the Old Testament.

Amen.

Resources:

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

The New Interpreter's Study Bible

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary

The Woman's Bible Commentary