

From Emptiness to Fullness: Through Loyal, Faithful, Covenant Relationships

A reflection on biblical literalism, patriarchy/feminism,
loyally faithful relationships, and racism towards immigrants.

The Book of Ruth
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd Freeman
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Before we hear this morning scripture passage, think about all you know about the Old Testament Book of Ruth. Even for fairly biblically literate Presbyterians the answer is probably, "Not much." Perhaps you remember something about the gleaning of wheat fields, or maybe the verses that are sometimes used in marriage ceremonies: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16-17).

The entire book has only 85 verses contained in 4 chapters. Despite its title, the Book of Ruth primarily tells a story of a woman named Naomi, a Hebrew woman who lived in the city of Bethlehem in the time of the judges – around 1200 BCE. The judges ruled after the time of Moses and Aaron, but before the first King of Israel, Saul, who was followed by King David and the long period of the royal monarchy.

Here's a bit more information that will provide meaning to the story. The story introduces us to Ruth, from the nearby country of Moab. Ruth becomes Naomi's daughter-in-law. Moabites were the despised and mortal enemies of the Hebrew people. But it is through Ruth's loving-kindness, extraordinary loyalty and faithfulness in her commitment to Naomi, after both of their husbands die, that becomes the instrument through which God "redeems" Naomi – leading her from emptiness to fullness of life. By the end of the story Ruth gives birth to a child. There is a surprise twist full of irony in this birth that I will explain in the sermon.

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

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I have some fairly modest goals for this sermon, including brief reflections on the themes of biblical literalism, patriarchy / feminism, loyally faithful covenant relationships, and racism towards immigrants. (And yes, you'll still get out of here around noon.)

At first glance, the Book of Ruth reads like a simple yet intriguing historical short story, a story that gives us a glimpse into the life of an ancient Israelite family some 1200 years before the birth of Jesus. 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 [biblical] scholars agree that the book of Ruth is fiction, a short story [or parable] 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.

That, perhaps, is **the hallmark of what is now known as progressive Christianity: looking at the goals of what each biblical author was trying to get across, rather than getting bogged down in our science-based, 21st century worldview that's obsessed with whether or not something was a literal historical fact. For as we have learned, a biblical story can contain truth without being historically factual. That's a hurdle, however, that most Christians still can't jump over.** So let's take a look at some of those goals that the author of the Book of Ruth may have been trying to teach.

Even though rampant patriarchy is evident in this story, 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, then, are certainly two of the greatest characters, female or male, to be found in scripture!

All this leads to one of the most important issues that is raised in this remarkable story, that of loyally faithful covenant relationships. **The theme and motivating force** that permeates this story is best described by the Hebrew word: **hesed**. As is often the case, this is one of those terms that is difficult to translate into just one English word.

Hesed reflects the compassion, loving-kindness, grace, faithfulness and steadfast love that are part of the nature and character of God. It is this understanding of hesed that underlies the charitable, selfless acts of Ruth that transform Naomi's life from one of empty despair to an existence full of blessings – it's what allows Naomi to journey from emptiness to fullness. This is beautifully and poetically reflected in the words I mentioned earlier that are often heard at a marriage ceremony. But remember, they are Ruth's words spoken to Naomi - the words of one woman spoken to another woman.

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

That's loving-kindness. That's faithfulness. That's loyalty. That's fidelity. That's covenant relationship. That's steadfast love. So one of the things that I would like for you to take away from this sermon are the following questions to reflect upon.

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

Reflect upon the times in your life's journey when you have experienced a transformation from emptiness to fullness. See those as times of redemption in your life.

Now, in addition to the themes of biblical literalism, patriarchy / feminism, loyally faithful covenant relationships, there's one more very important point that the Book of Ruth leads us to reflect upon – **racism (as expressed in and through mixed marriages) and 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 that Ruth is from the country of Moab – a traditional enemy and despised ethnic group as far as the ancient Israelites are concerned. This should raise questions in our minds with regard to the insider/outsider dynamics at play in our own communities today. *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* states:

It is quite possible that the writer did intend this little book to be a tract against a kind of racism. Centuries after the time of Ruth, Jerusalem fell, its people carried into slavery in Babylon. A century after a little group of refugees returned [from Exile], Ezra and Nehemiah led in rebuilding what had been intended to be the kingdom of God. Israel's undoing, they were sure, had been its compromise with paganism, its adoption of the gods of its pagan neighbors. And so they attempted to stamp out all foreign influences.

Nehemiah boasts of his determined "cleansing" of the sacred race: "In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Amon, and Moab... And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair." [That's from Nehemiah 13.] Not only did Ezra forbid Jews to marry Gentile women, but he ordered them to divorce the Gentile wives they already had and to throw out their own half-Gentile children." [That's from Ezra 10.] And ancient Hebrew law even declared that if one married a Moabite, "even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." That's from Deuteronomy 23. I wouldn't be surprised if someone back then with this mindset suggested building a wall around Israel's border and making it's despised neighbors pay for it.

Racist actions and attitudes such as these should lead us to ask of scripture: Was this truly God's will, or simply a reflection of nationalistic, isolationist, purist, cultural and racial prejudice? I believe wholeheartedly that it is the latter.

It is perhaps no accident, therefore, that the author of the Book of Ruth seizes every opportunity to remind us that this heroine is by birth a Moabite. Ruth's race and immigrant status not only didn't matter to the author, **this story was most likely written as a direct indictment to the purist reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah**. So to our own Bible-toting elected officials, locally and nationally, as well as our presidential candidates, this should, but probably won't, give them pause and guidance in dealing with the hot-button issues of immigration reform and refugee settlement in our country today.

Since Ruth, an outsider, was an integral part of Naomi's redemption, is it possible that those we call "outsiders" many actually be part of our redemption? It's worth thinking about. So it is with a deep sense of irony that the author of the Book of Ruth informs us that Ruth – this Moabite woman in a mixed marriage – is the great-grandmother of none other than King David himself, who is the ancestor of someone known as Jesus of Nazareth.

Like Boaz and the reapers in the field, therefore, we are forced by the Book of Ruth to **question how we deal with the dispossessed and the powerless and the outsiders in our society.**

What at first may have seemed like a good and simple short story turns out to be a remarkable opportunity to reflect upon those themes of biblical literalism, patriarchy / feminism, loyally faithful relationships, and racism as expressed in and through the treatment of immigrants.

Take time this week to reflect upon your own understanding of these important issues, and especially their role in the journey from emptiness to fullness of life.

Amen.

Resources:

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary

The New Interpreter's Study Bible

The New Jerome Biblical Commentary

The Woman's Bible Commentary