***I LOVE TO TELL THE STORY: RUTH AND NAOMI***

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Texts: Ruth 1:1-22 and Matthew 16:24-25

This past week some of our kids have been participating in Compassion Camp which is our virtual Vacation Bible School. It offers songs, activities, prayers, and Bible stories that focus in some way on the theme of compassion. What is compassion? It has been described this way: “*I see your hurt, I feel your hurt with you, and I help to ease your hurt*.” The story for one of those compassion days was this story of Ruth and Naomi, two women from different nations drawn together by circumstance, by marriage, and ultimately by faith and faithfulness to God and to one another.

The Book of Ruth is a play in four acts set in the Middle East in the time of the Judges, in the days of Gideon, Samson and Deborah, before there was a king in Israel. In those days Israel was still a loose confederation of tribes enduring cycles of disobedience, punishment, repentance, and redemption. The repeated refrain was: “*Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord*.” What a contrast then is this story of Ruth, set in the same time and immediately following the book of Judges in our Old Testament, for it is a story of faithfulness, love, and doing what is good in the sight of the Lord.

The story opens with a famine in Israel. Food is scarce and the options for survival are limited. Naomi and her husband Elimilech, Israelites by nationality and by faith (for in that time nationality and faith were one and the same), leave in search of food and travel to the land of Moab on the other side of the Dead Sea. This is not a trip to the corner grocer. It is a journey beyond the safe bounds of Israel to a land that honors neither the Israelites, nor their God. The Israelites and Moabites are not on the best of terms. The King of Moab once asked Balaam to curse Israel, which he refused to do, and Israelite law forbids any Moabite from being admitted into the congregation of the Lord. Israelites and Moabites are like oil and water – they don’t mix. For Naomi and Elimilech to go to Moab is thus an act of either desperation or rank unfaithfulness. But go they do, and with them they take their two sons, Mahlon (whose name means “Sickness”) and Chilion (whose name means “Spent”). Not surprisingly neither of those names has gained much popularity over the years!

Barely have they arrived in Moab until Elimilech dies, leaving Naomi a widow with her two sons. Sickness and Spent marry Moabite girls, a clear no-no for good Israelite boys. But living in a foreign land, surrounded by nothing but foreign girls, they have little choice. They can marry Moabites, remain bachelors, or return home to Israel. They choose to stay and marry Orpah and Ruth. For ten years they live in Moab. Why, one might wonder, did they not return home? Was the famine that bad – ten years’ bad – bad enough to justify living in the godforsaken land of Moab? Or were there other reasons why they chose not to return to Israel? Perhaps business in Moab was good or perhaps the political situation in Israel was shaky, or perhaps they stayed because the sons had taken Moabite wives who would be outcasts in Israel. For whatever reason they stayed, and Sickness and Spent then lived up to their names and died, leaving three childless widows – Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth.

Keep in mind that in that day children were regarded as a blessing and motherhood the highest calling for a woman. For these three women to be widowed without children was nothing short of a curse. They had no prospects for marriage or children or any life but one of poverty; for each of them the future was bleak. For that very reason Naomi urged Orpah and Ruth to return to their parents’ homes in Moab. There they might be provided for. There they might find husbands among their own people. There they might find a future. For her part, Naomi will return to Israel. Orpah accepts her mother-in-law’s advice. She kisses Naomi, wishes her well, and goes home to her parents. But Ruth refuses to go. In words that have echoed across the centuries, Ruth pledges herself to Naomi:

*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.*

*May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!*

Those familiar words are still read and cherished today, but in a different context. They are most frequently quoted at weddings as new spouses declare their love and devotion to one another. “Where you go, I will go…” Ruth’s words describe the kind of devotion that one might expect of spouses – a whole-hearted commitment to the other “as long as we both shall live”. They are words fit for spouses to hear and repeat and follow. But Ruth is not marrying Naomi, and the promise isn’t mutual. It is Ruth’s unilateral promise to tie her future to Naomi’s future, dim as it is. Ruth is willing to give up everything – her ethnic identity, her religion, her family, her future, in order to stay with Naomi.

Even the disciples made no such commitment! When Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John from their nets, they follow him, but we hear no such grand pledge of devotion on their part. Perhaps those words were unspoken, communicated silently in the casting aside of their nets – “*where you go, I will go, Jesus…*” But then again, perhaps not. The kind of selfless devotion that Ruth pledges, a willingness to place another’s interests totally above your own, is rare.

In his book *All Over But the Shoutin’*, Rick Braggs describes his mother in such self-sacrificing terms. When his father deserted the family, Rick’s mother literally strapped him on her back and headed into the cotton fields to pick cotton. It was backbreaking work, but it was the only work available to her, the only way to feed her child and keep the family afloat. Braggs writes:

*I asked her, many years later, if the strap of the sack cut deeper into her back and shoulders because I was there. “You wasn’t heavy,” she said. Having a baby with her made the long rows shorter, somehow, because when she felt like quitting, when she felt like her legs were going to buckle or her back would break in two, all she had to do was look behind her. It gave her a reason to keep pulling*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The child wasn’t a burden; he was her source of hope and the inspiration for her to persevere in those cotton fields when the days were hot and long. She worked, not for herself, but for her child, and she was willing to make whatever sacrifices were necessary to realize her dreams for him. Such was the devotion of that mother to her child. Perhaps you have known someone like that, someone who was willing to make great personal sacrifices in order to make possible a better life for a child, grandchild, or others, or you.

World War II is replete with accounts of men and women who made such sacrifices. Soldiers willingly sacrificed their lives to preserve the freedoms we enjoy. In the Civil Rights movement, Freedom Riders risked their lives to fight for civil rights in the South, and John Lewis suffered a fractured skull as the result of brutality against him and peaceful protestors in Alabama. Today we hear stories of men and women who make such sacrifices daily, risking their lives in order to care for others in this pandemic. Is there anyone for whom you are willing to take such a risk? Is there anyone for whom you are willing to make such sacrifices, anyone at all, other than yourself?

Ruth made those sacrifices for her mother-in-law. She went where Naomi went to lodge where Naomi lodged among the people she came to regard as her own people worshiping the God who was Naomi’s God. One might wonder what would attract her to that God at all, for that God had offered few blessings to Naomi. Her life had been a series of tragedies – famine, the death of her husband and sons. It is no wonder that Naomi returns to Israel saying, “*Call me ‘Bitter*’ *for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me… the Lord has dealt harshly with me and has brought calamity upon me.*” Yet it is that harsh God, the source of Naomi’s calamities, who Ruth claims as her own God. Instead of fleeing back to the Moabite gods, Ruth clings to Naomi and to her God, the God of Israel.

That decision by Ruth is a turning point in her story, for the rest of Ruth and Naomi’s story is full of blessings. While Ruth is gleaning in a field, she meets Elimilech’s kinsman Boaz, “a prominent rich man” who has heard of Ruth’s dedication to Naomi. He takes note of her and shows her his good favor in her gleaning. With Naomi’s guidance, Ruth endears herself to Boaz who eventually takes Ruth as his wife. In time Ruth bears a son named Obed who becomes the grandfather of King David and an ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth, the messiah. In Jesus’ family tree, Ruth is one of only five women named – a Moabite widow whose commitment to Naomi brought her blessings in the end. Naomi too is blessed as she becomes Obed’s nurse and finds with Ruth continuing support and security in her old age, so that Naomi’s nosy neighbors say to her:

*Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin…[The child] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him*.

A story that begins with death and bitterness ends with blessing and joy, for Ruth, a widowed foreigner, showed compassion, love, and commitment to Naomi. She was to her a blessing!

Are you such a blessing to anyone? What kind of friend are you to those you call your friends? Ruth’s words affirm a deep and abiding friendship, one that makes sacrifices, takes risks, and offers support in troubled times. Are you that kind of friend or spouse or son or daughter or do your friendships always take a backseat to your own interests? For whom, if anyone, are you willing to make sacrifices and take risks with your present and future? For whom, if anyone, are you willing to set aside all that is comfortable and familiar to venture into the unknown? As you ponder those questions, remember Jesus who gave his life for us, enduring the cross to free us from sin and death, and then hear his words, “*If you would be my disciple, you must deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow me.*” Perhaps your response to him might be drawn from those faithful words of Ruth:

*Where you go, Lord, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge.*

*Your people will be my people, and you will be my God.* Amen

1. *All Over But the Shoutin’*, Rick Braggs, p.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)