

Faith and Faithfulness

In the name of him who is Trustworthy and True, dear friends in Christ: The biblical account of Ruth, the first part of which is today's Old Testament lesson, usually gets attention only in women's Bible studies. This is the one Sunday in the our entire three year lectionary that a reading from Ruth appears at all. The result is that while most Christians have heard of Ruth, few know or really understand her story. And the strangest thing is that the most familiar passage in the whole book, the one we heard this morning about "going where you go and staying where you stay" and so on, is most often used in the church as a wedding text – which is okay, I guess; but it's a misappropriation because the words aren't spoken between a husband and wife; rather they are Ruth's words to her mother-in-law. And what really makes them remarkable is that of all human relationships, that between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, is the one that is most likely to be ... um, *strained*. The kinds of things a woman says (or would like to say) to her mother-in-law aren't normally what you'd expect to see printed in the Bible. So there's something unexpected here. And really, that's what the story of Ruth is about: God's grace in unexpected places and of great faith in the Lord in unexpected people.

The story begins in Bethlehem of Judea in the time of the Judges about eleven or twelve hundred years before the birth of our Savior in the same city. It was a dark time in the history of Israel when people pretty much forgot the Lord and his will and did whatever seemed right in their own eyes. And what we see throughout this period are repeated cycles of God's people wandering off into sin and idolatry, and the Lord responding by depriving them of blessings or bringing in enemies to occupy the land to make their lives miserable until in desperation they cried out to him for help. Then the Lord would send them a deliverer: a Gideon or a Samson to put things right again. But the good times never lasted long because once life returned to normal, the people soon forgot the Lord and wandered off away from him again.

It was during one such cycle of apostasy that the Land of Israel was struck with a famine. The Lord brought it on his people in order to call them back to himself. But as such discipline sometimes does, it had the opposite effect on a man named Elimelech. Like a rebellious child refusing to be corrected by a loving parent, instead of turning back to the Lord, he ran farther away. Taking his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, he fled eastward to the land of Moab in the hope of finding a way to escape the famine. He thought by doing so he might save himself and his family. It didn't turn out that way. As usually happens when people try to save themselves, what the family ultimately discovered there was mostly heartache and death.

And it really seems odd that a man from Judah would go to Moab to escape a famine. First, because famines in that part of the world are usually caused by lack of rain. And being farther east, away from the ocean and closer to the vast Arabian Desert, you would expect things in Moab to even worse than in Israel. But beyond that, the Moabites were not particularly friendly to Israelites. At times there was war between the nations. And even in the most peaceful times, Moabite raiding parties would cross the border and wreak havoc. It turns out that the Moabites were distant cousins of the Israelites. They were descended from Abraham's rather flaky nephew, Lot. Lot, you may recall, had come out of idol-worshipping Mesopotamia with his uncle Abraham in response to the promise of God; but Lot's problem was that he really couldn't make up his mind. As much as he liked being associated with Abraham and God's promises, he didn't want to leave completely the seedy and sinful world that he'd left behind. So he tried to camp in between. He tried to walk the fine line between being a citizen of God's

Kingdom and still be a full-fledged citizen of this world. Think of him as the Old Testament version of a guy who wants to keep his name on the church roster, but that's as close to the church as he wants to get. He doesn't want to be bothered with any pretense of actually living a life of faith. It never works. It didn't work for Lot, and it certainly didn't work for his descendants. The Moabites had long since fallen into the worst sorts of wickedness and idolatry that included cultic prostitution and even the sacrifice of their infant children who were cast alive on heaps of burning coals before their stone god Chemosh.

So again, it seems rather strange that Elimelech would lead his family to such an evil place, and stranger still that he would allow his sons to marry Moabite girls. The Lord had strictly commanded his people not to intermarry with such pagans because the unholy mingling would corrupt them and turn their hearts away from him. So taken altogether, we see how completely Elimelech wandered from the Lord and failed his family. Instead of fulfilling his God-given role as spiritual leader, he led them to ruin. And though it's not explicitly stated in the text, it seems implied that his premature death was the Lord's judgment on him. That his two sons were also struck down in their prime is good evidence that they followed in their father's faithless footsteps. But as we heard in today's Epistle lesson, the Lord is faithful even when his people are not. And when the men of God fail in their assigned duties, the Lord raises up godly women to keep the torch of faith alive and to pass it on to future generations.

Naomi was such a woman. It must have been hard on her to see her husband making the foolish decisions that led the family to disaster. As a woman faithful to God, doubtlessly she disapproved of her husband's choices; but at the same time, she knew that her God-given role was to be a faithful and obedient wife and mother. It's a tough spot to be in. It's certain that she worked from that role to try to influence her family toward the true faith through her loving labors, her prayers, and her stories, songs, and little reminders – unfortunately, apparently without effect on her husband or sons. And so, as often happens in this fallen world, the righteous are made to suffer because of the sins of others. And Naomi's suffering was particularly tragic. To be widowed and then so soon afterward to suffer the loss of both her sons would be the cause of grief beyond comprehension. Add to that the fact that it all happens in a foreign land where there would be no support from extended family, and where no one would be very much moved to compassion for an Israelite stranger. And then there was her future to consider. In that day and age there was no such thing as retirement savings accounts or social security. No, a woman like Naomi would have counted on her children and grandchildren to support her in her old age. Her survival depended on it. But now she was destitute. Here in Moab, as a childless widow, there was nothing for her. And though the prospects for her for in her own country weren't much better, she heard that the Lord had come to the aid of his people. And that gave her hope precisely because she knew the Lord's good and gracious dealings for those who trust in him.

It's Naomi's faith on which the story turns. Despite all her grief and suffering, she did not give up her faith in the Lord. And it seems that it was her great faith in the midst of her sorrows and losses that had such a profound effect on her daughter-in-law, Ruth. In happier times, Ruth had known Naomi to possess the inner beauty of a woman of faith: the patience, kindness, and gentleness that naturally flow from a close walk with the Lord. Surely that made an impression. And there's no question that through their conversations Naomi had begun to plant in Ruth the seeds of true faith by telling her about the works of the Lord for his people and the promises that he had made to them. But now for Ruth to see Naomi's faith in the Lord unshaken by the terrible things that had come upon her proved beyond doubt that there was something concrete there. Her mother-in-law's religion wasn't just for show. It wasn't merely superstition or religious talk. No, there was in Naomi a solid rock of confidence – and that Rock, we know, was

Christ living in her by the Word. Ruth wanted *that* for herself. The hunger of her own soul for something real and meaningful and certain in this deceptive and shifting world was drawn to Naomi and to Naomi's faith in her Lord.

It's this that elicits from Ruth the passage that is so familiar to us: "Don't urge me to leave you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." And what we see in these words is that Naomi's faith *has* been transmitted to Ruth – she now shares it – and that from it is flowing a *faithfulness* to Naomi. Ruth wants to tie their uncertain futures together, though it doesn't make sense rationally. If Ruth were to stay in Moab, she could find a husband, settle down, have a few kids; her future would be secure. By going with Naomi, she's setting herself up to be what Naomi is now, only worse. She'd be a childless widow in a land where Moabites are held in contempt. It's a huge leap of faith for her to go with Naomi; one that she knows will likely cause her much trouble and suffering. But she's been overtaken by the love of Christ that dwells within her by the power of the Spirit. Her words make this clear. And we can tell because it isn't hard to hear Christ speaking through what she says. It's essentially the same promise of faithfulness that he makes to each one of us: "I will be with you always". More than that, we hear in it echoes of the Gospel itself. Christ came to be with us to make us his people and to make his God our God. He made our death his own, and he was buried in our place. And the Lord dealt with him ever so severely when he was punished for our sin because we, like Elimelech, had separated ourselves from God. Ruth's declaration of faithfulness to Naomi is really a confession that shows that the Child to be born in Bethlehem twelve hundred years later already dwelled within her by faith.

Still, though this is a story in which we can see the Savior who will come in the future and who will guarantee an eternally happy ending, it is nevertheless a story in need of a savior for the present to give it a happy ending now. As it turns out, there is one. And since we don't get to talk about Ruth very much, I don't want to leave you wondering what happened.

It turns out that the now deceased Elimelech owned some property near Bethlehem. And you might think that since they were married the property should have now belonged to Naomi, and that she could have sold it or rented it out and then lived off the money; but it didn't work that way in Old Testament Israel. No, only men could actually own real estate. The idea was that men were tied to the ground like Adam who came from it, and that women were tied to their men like Eve who came from Adam. It seems strange to us, but it was part of reinforcing the biblical roles that God assigned to men and women. Now, even though only males could own property, they couldn't buy or sell it. The only way to get property in Israel was to inherit it. It had been given to certain families by God at the time of the conquest in the days of Joshua, and then handed down from generation to generation along the male lines. And there was a message there too: by making it impossible to buy a piece of the Promised Land the Lord was saying that you can't buy or earn your way into the eternal Promised Land. The only way to get it is for God to give it to you – for you to inherit it – that is, for you to receive it upon the death of someone else – someone who just happened to be the son of the previous owner. And hopefully you can see the basic Gospel message being reinforced in all of that: how we inherit the Promised Land because of the death of God's Son. But as sweet as that message is, it left a person in Naomi's circumstances in a bind. Because Elimelech had no male heir to receive ownership of the property, she was out. The property could be claimed by Elimelech's closest male next-of-kin – that is, unless ... unless there was someone who would be willing to serve as what was called a "kinsman redeemer".

You see, the Lord *had* provided a way to protect women in this particular circumstance. The basic problem was that Elimelech had no male heir; but if he could be given one now, then there wouldn't be a problem for Naomi. To address this particular situation, the Lord had given his people the Law of Levirate Marriage. Again, this is going to sound weird to us, but bear with me because there's a message here too. It happened that if a woman was widowed before she had a son who would have stood in line to inherit property, the Law of Levirate Marriage allowed a male next-of-kin, say a brother or cousin of the woman's now deceased husband, to step in and give her a child, that is, to impregnate her. And then *legally* that child, if it were a son, would be counted as the dead husband's child. He would then inherit the land and presumably care for his mother when she was old with the living the land made for the family. The law, as strange as it sounds, kept the inheritance in the family and guaranteed that women would not be left without means to survive.

So what Naomi needed was someone, a male relative of Elimelech, who would be willing to serve as a kinsman redeemer; that is, a guy who would give her family an heir for Elimelech and so redeem the land. But there were problems. Naomi was getting up there in years and was likely past having a son of her own. But Ruth was also a childless widow in Elimelech's family. Her son, if a kinsman redeemer could be found willing, would be Elimelech's legal grandson and therefore heir to the estate. But she was a Moabite, and few men in Israel would want to have anything to do with her. They hated Moabites. And the bigger trouble was that the guy who stood closest in line to help these women had other plans. As Elimelech's male next-of-kin, he knew that if Elimelech had no legal heirs, the land would be his. It served him not to help. And the fact that Ruth was a Moabite gave him an excuse that no one would question. He could refuse to help these needy women and appear to be righteous at the same time.

His selfish plans were frustrated, however. A man named Boaz was another cousin of Elimelech. A godly and faithful man, he was concerned for Naomi, and he saw what a faithful and good daughter-in-law Ruth was to her. He saw Ruth working hard to support the two of them, how tireless and devoted she was, and how much she loved Naomi. He saw the Spirit of God working in her life and his heart was moved first with compassion; and then, as the story developed, with love for Ruth. He became Ruth's husband, giving her not only the son needed to redeem Elimelech's land, but a home and place of her own among God's people. It was more than Ruth could have hoped for both for herself and for Naomi. And as it turns out, God's blessings for her were greater still. Her first son by Boaz was named Obed, who in turn became the father of Jesse, who was the father of David who became Israel's king. And so we see that the Lord brought this pagan Moabite woman first to faith, then to faithfulness, and ultimately into the lineage that led to his own Son Jesus Christ. And what he did for Ruth, he continues to do for us today. Through the godly influence of others who share with us his holy Word, he brings us to faith, to faithfulness, and into his royal family. And for the sake of his Son who died to redeem us he gives us an inheritance that will last forever. For all that he has done and continues to do for us, to him be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!