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A Girl from Moab

a sermon on Ruth 3.1-5; 4.13-17

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The story of Ruth, a girl from Moab: When I saw this scripture reading in the lectionary I had to preach it. I have never preached on Ruth here at Westminster. Plus I have a personal connection to this story. When I was in third grade, the children's choir at my church put on a musical play of the story of Ruth. Our director selected me to play Boaz. In a certain scene, Ruth comes over to Boaz and kisses him on the cheek and says, "Thank you for your kindness." The girl who played Ruth was very pretty, but I was at that age when boys think girls have cooties. The worst part was, my friends teased me mercilessly. But I got to wear a fake beard, and the play came off well, and the kiss wasn't so bad. Ever since, I have felt a special connection to this little book of the Bible.

Another reason I had to preach this was: A friend I met in my doctor of ministry class is an associate pastor at a large church. He told me his pastor preached a sermon series from the book of Ruth called "Ruth will set you free." I have no idea what he preached, but my friend said it was a powerful series and lives were changed. I wanted to see if I could find a powerful gospel message in Ruth, and I have to confess, it wasn't difficult.

The book of Ruth ought to speak to us where we live, because it is all about everyday life. It is about family, death, remarriage, and the things we do to get by. It's full of real people facing tough economic times. Granted, the customs back then were different from the culture we live in; but people are people, and they were people like us. Anyone who has ever had to move to find work can identify with this book. Anyone who has lost loved ones, anyone who ever remarried, or had a child or grandchild. Anyone who has known the love of a relative who cared for them. This is real life, so it ought to speak to us.

On the other hand, you don't see God much in this book. It is not really about him. Or is it? He is there, working behind the scenes. This only becomes apparent, however, at the end of the story. All along, God was working out his great plan of salvation. The genealogy from Abraham to Jesus ran right through this normal, broken, loving family. And they didn't even know it. God's purposes do not become evident until the end. Ruth and Boaz brought Obed into the world. Obed and his wife brought Jesse into the world. Jesse and his wife brought David into the world. This was King David, with whom God made a special covenant.

So again, this book is a lot like real life. On the surface, maybe you don't see God much. But he is there, working out his purpose, and in his time it all becomes apparent. This little book actually tells us a lot about God and his intentions.

I only read a few verses of the book, so in case you are not familiar with it, allow me to tell the basic outline of the story. By the way, if you are not familiar with this book, you ought to go home and read it this afternoon. It only has four chapters. It's only four pages long in our pew Bibles. Don't read it now, but do read it later.

The story opens with a family in the little town of Bethlehem. Elimelech and his wife Naomi had two sons. Disaster strikes in the first sentence of the book. There was a famine in the land. Unable to support themselves, the family packed up and moved to Moab. Moab was a neighboring country – not a part of Israel – so they were living in a foreign land. They were immigrants looking for work. Some things do not change in 3,000 years. In the Old Testament we read of the rocky relationship between Israel and Moab. Deuteronomy 23.3 says, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” The Israelites viewed the Moabites as godless idolaters and rivals, and the Moabites seemed to have held a similar view from the other direction. So you know the family was in dire straights when you hear they moved to Moab, but it was, after all, the closest place.

They made a living there. Then Elimelech died. Naomi was a widow, but she was OK because she had her boys, now grown men. A widow in that time and place was very vulnerable because she had no economic opportunity. She had to depend on relatives to care for her. Naomi's sons did that. They got so comfortable in Moab that they married Moabite women. Moses would have frowned on that, but hey, when you live in Moab, what other women are there, right? Then things went from bad to worse. Both her sons died, and Naomi was left with only her two widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

They had no way to make a living. They had nowhere to turn. Naomi couldn't care for them. Unlike her, they were young. They might hope to marry again and have a family. She told them to go back to their parents and start over. She would go back to Bethlehem and see if any of her relatives were still around and would take care of her. Orpah went home. Ruth refused. In the most famous line of the book, she embraces Naomi and says, “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!” That settled things. Ruth and Naomi went back to Bethlehem together, Ruth now the immigrant.

The Law of Moses commanded farmers not to make a second pass through their crops. They cut and took what they could. Anything that fell or was left belonged to the poor. The poor would come and glean the field after the harvesters had passed. This was how Ruth and Naomi would make their living. Naomi was too old, so it was up to Ruth.

Ruth went to glean in the field of Boaz. Boaz noticed her. He found out who she was, and he was impressed by her devotion to Naomi, so he was kind and generous to her. When Ruth came home with ample grain, and Naomi heard where she had been, she was ecstatic. She told Ruth that Boaz was a relative of her dead husband. Naomi instantly perceived the hand of God. In those days they had unusual customs designed to keep land in the same family. Naomi saw the opportunity for a match that would preserve her family line and provide for both Ruth and her.

She told Ruth to make an overture to Boaz. This part of the book is brilliantly written in Hebrew because it uses figures of speech that could be read either innocently or not-so-innocently. When Ruth went to Boaz as he slept on the threshing floor, did she just curl up beside him or was it something more? The text leaves you guessing. In any event, Boaz got the hint. He proposed marriage. He was impressed by Ruth's faithfulness, determination, and hard work. He recognized a rare woman when he saw one.

There is an odd scene near the end where Boaz takes care of the legalities of marrying Ruth and claiming the property of Elimelech. You know how the story ends because I read it to you.

This is a fun, interesting, beautiful story. It is also God's Word to us. So what is God saying? To determine that, we have to answer two questions: How does this story fit into the one great story of the Bible? And what does it mean on its own?

The first question is easy. Ruth was King David's great-grandmother. That means she was also an ancestor of Jesus. In fact, Matthew lists her by name in his genealogy of Jesus, even though women were not usually listed. Why? Because Ruth was a Moabite. This story is one of those places in the Old Testament where God hints at his plan to save the whole world. Yes, Israel is his chosen people, but that does not mean he hates the other nations, even Moab. That law in Deuteronomy aimed to keep Israelites from falling into idolatry by worshipping Moabite gods. But Ruth was no idolater. She embraced the God of Israel.

All along God's plan was to save the whole world. Israel was chosen, not for her own sake, but for the sake of the world. So it is appropriate that Jesus has a Moabite ancestor. Anyone who has faith in him, regardless of race, is part of God's people. With Jesus, God opened the door.

Anyone standing alongside the field that first day Ruth came to glean would have seen just an immigrant looking for a way to survive. But God's hand led Ruth there. The bystander would have seen God's great plan of salvation unfolding, but would not have realized it. Chance did not bring Ruth and Boaz together. Naomi's scheme didn't do it either. God brought them together, because he wanted David to exist. He wanted Jesus to be born who he was, so God put a Moabite in his family tree.

That's how Ruth fits into the Bible. What does the book say on its own? This is a bit trickier. The book of Ruth is about redemption. Naomi particularly finds redemption because she goes from being all alone in the world to being the center of a growing family. Ruth too finds redemption and takes her place among God's people. The family line of Elimelech is also redeemed, and his ancestral land stays in the family. So the book is about redemption, but more than that it is about steadfast, faithful love. In Hebrew the word is *hesed*. Remember, this is the one Hebrew word I say you ought to know if you only know one Hebrew word. *Hesed* describes the covenant love of God. *Hesed* never gives up. All the redemption that happens in the book of Ruth happens because of *hesed*. The word only appears a few times, but the concept is everywhere.

When Ruth returns from gleaning in the field of Boaz and tells Naomi where she has been, Naomi exclaims, "May the Lord bless Boaz! The Lord's kindness [*hesed*] has not forsaken the living or the dead." Naomi had grown bitter. Losing her husband, losing both her sons. No way to make a living. She was bitter. She didn't care about much of anything anymore. Why should she? Have you ever felt that way? Then in a flash she sees it: God has not abandoned her. God is there. His kindness does not fail. God's *hesed* gives second chances and new life.

God's *hesed* never fails. His kindness, his covenant faithfulness, his steadfast love – that's our hope! It brought Ruth and Boaz together. Because of it, Jesus was born, and because of it he died for you. Even today, God shows his kindness to us in so many ways: calling us to faith, working through us, making us holy (painful though that may be), picking us up when we fall down, and keeping us going. *Hesed* is different from grace. Grace means we do not deserve God's kindness, but he gives it anyway. *Hesed* is the kindness he gives. You can see grace and *hesed* are related, but they are not the same.

Look back over your life, and you should be able to see God's hand. If you have walked with God in faith, you will have learned that God is gracious. He does not deal with us as we deserve. He is so much better. You will also know God's *hesed*. His steady hand is always there, holding you up. He never lets go. He doesn't let you fall. If your life were a song, God's *hesed* would be the steady rhythm underneath all the music. God's *hesed* is like being on a ship, and you can feel the movement of the ocean. It's like riding on a train, and all the way you hear and feel the steady click-clack, click-clack of the train rumbling along.

If you want to see *hesed* in action on a human level, the book of Ruth offers one of the best examples I know: Ruth's devotion to Naomi. I already read what Ruth told her. "Where you go, I will go ... where you die, I will die. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" With those words, Ruth took responsibility for Naomi. She knew she would have to help her mother-in-law along the way. Maybe she figured Naomi would never make it alone. Maybe Naomi knew that too, but she didn't care, not at that point. Ruth went into the field to glean. Ruth brought the grain back to feed Naomi. That's *hesed*. You and me, together forever, I'm not going to give up on you no matter what. That's love, but it is a special kind of love – a stubborn, tenacious love that refuses to let go. That's the love God has for you. It was the love Ruth had for Naomi.

Boaz was impressed by Ruth's kindness toward Naomi. He praises her for it at their first meeting, and when he proposes to her, he praises her for her loyalty (her *hesed*) again.

Now here comes the tricky part of hearing God's Word. Does redemption come about because of God's *hesed* or Ruth's? As you go through the story, Ruth's extraordinary *hesed* stands out. Naomi regains life because Ruth loves her faithfully. At the end, of course, we find out what Naomi saw in a flash. God's *hesed* was driving the whole story. It was as if all their lives were a book – Naomi's, Ruth's, Boaz's – and God was the secret author. To even ask my question this way shows it cannot be answered. God showed steadfast love to this family. In fact, he was working through them for a much larger purpose, and ultimately he showed his steadfast love to the whole world. At the same time, what would have happened without Ruth's steadfast love for Naomi?

This should be a wake up call for us. God is calling us to *hesed*. He wants us to be like him. He wants us to love one another with the same kind of die-hard love he has. Ruth was God's partner. God used her powerfully because she loved the way God does. He did not use her dramatically. What could be more mundane than making a living gleaning wheat or getting married and having a baby? It happens all the time. Ruth had no idea the important role she played in God's plan to save the world.

God works powerfully through us, even in the ordinary business of life, when we love the way he does. You can be a steadfast rock ... in your family, your church, on the job. What difference could you make if you said, "I'm never going to give up." "I'm never going to give up on my children (or grandchildren)." "I'm never going to give up on my spouse." "I'm never going to give up on my friends." "I'm never going to give up on my church." The steadfast kindness and loyalty of one person can make a big difference.

A child or grandchild makes one bad choice after another. You show tough love. You don't enable. But you keep loving. You keep praying. You never give up. It means something. My friend who got hooked on crack, met Christ in prison, and became a totally new man—his Christian mother never gave up on him. She prayed for him everyday, sometimes for hours, even when she had no idea where he was.

A marriage hits the rocks. One spouse's *hesed* can make a difference. That's the point of the Love Dare movie and book. You cannot control the other person, but you can choose what you will do. Of course, one person cannot make a marriage work if the other is determined it won't. But if both husband and wife together resolve to show *hesed* to each other, I am convinced almost anything can be worked out and overcome.

Church too. Most people tend to have little commitment to their church. There are beautiful exceptions, and we have a lot of them here. Many people just look for a worship style or a pastor that suits their fancy. They are quick to shop around when the pastor leaves or the church has problems. What if people said, "This church is where God wants me, and I'm going to love this church and do my part and not walk away when that would be easy to do."

Pastors tend to be as bad about this as everyone else. I think Westminster has shown *hesed* to me and to my family. God brought me here at a critical point in my life for two reasons: one of course to be the pastor, but also to start our family. For me the two are connected. I strive to show *hesed* to this congregation. It is beautiful when a pastor loves a church with a steadfast, faithful love. That's what I want to do.

Maybe my friend's pastor was right. Ruth does set you free. The book reminds you of God's stubborn, steadfast love for you. Nothing sets a soul free like God's mighty hand. At the same time, Ruth is an example for us. God calls us to love the way he does, and nothing is more down-to-earth than that. God calls you to show *hesed* in your family, your church, your community or work. You have been set free to be a rock, a pillar that holds your family together, that holds your church up, that brings blessings to other people. If you do that, then the words Boaz spoke to Ruth are for you: "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" Amen.

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