

"A Lesson in Loyalty" – Ruth 1 – November 4, 2018

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

One day a young beaming college man walked into a photography studio with a framed picture of his girlfriend. He wanted to have the picture duplicated. This involved removing the photo from the frame. In doing so, the studio owner noticed an inscription on the back of the photograph. It read: "My dearest Tom, I love you with all my heart. I love you more and more each day. I will love you forever and ever. I am yours for all eternity." It was signed "Diane," but this lovely sentiment of enduring adoration also contained a post script, which read, "If we ever break up, I want this picture back." Quite the escape clause. A way out if things get rough along the way. You'll have my devotion for all eternity, as long as things go the way I expect them to. (From the book *Illustrations Unlimited*, edited by James S. Hewitt, p. 97.)

Today we begin a 4-week series on the Book of Ruth. As we will see, Ruth is woman who epitomizes loyalty. Nothing can turn her from her course, once she sets her mind on something. For her, the escape clause does not exist.

The Book of Ruth takes place early in Israel's history, during the time of the judges, and it begins with a famine in the land. An Israelite man by the name of Elimelech takes his family from their home in Bethlehem and travels to the country of Moab, seeking food. Now Moab and Israel had a rocky history, and moving to Moab was certainly not the first choice of any decent, law abiding Israelite. But hunger is a strong motivator.

Elimelech's wife is Naomi, and in Hebrew her name means "sweet." But for Naomi, life in Moab becomes anything but sweet. In time she will renounce her name and call herself "Mara" which means "bitter." The couple have two sons are called Mahlon and Chillion.

Not long after arriving in Moab, Naomi's husband Elimelech dies. She is now a widow, but at least has two boys who can take care of her. Her two sons take Moabite wives, named Orpah and Ruth. Years pass, yet the young women remain barren. No children are born to carry on the family line. After about ten years, Mahlon and Chillion also die. Suddenly the woman Naomi is not only a widow but has no male relative to care for her. Widows in this time period had no social status, no economic means to survive, and in some cases were forced to turn to prostitution. Naomi's life has turned upside down. No husband, no sons, living in a foreign land, and saddled with two Gentile daughters-in-law, who are also now widows.

A pinpoint of light, however, came to Naomi in her darkness. She heard that God had given food to her people, so she decided to journey back to the land of Judah. As she set out, her two daughters-in-law journeyed with her. But she stopped them. As they were foreigners and widows, they would no place in her land. She implored them to return to the houses of their mothers. There they would have the opportunity to find new husbands and thus find security for

themselves. She declared her wish to them that God would deal kindly with them as they had dealt with their husbands and with Naomi herself.

The words here translated "deal kindly" do not give justice to the full meaning of the Hebrew word "hesed." In the Hebrew the word "hesed" is considered an essential part of the nature of God and is frequently used to describe God's acts of unmerited grace and mercy. For humans to show "hesed" to one another means to demonstrate loving kindness and loyalty that extends far beyond what is required by the law, beyond anything that the recipient expects or deserves to receive.

In this verse, Naomi was implying that the two women have already shown kindness and loyalty to her and her two sons that go far beyond the call of duty. She now hoped that God would follow their example and show them "hesed" in providing for them security and rest in the form of new husbands. She kissed them good-bye. But they, weeping aloud, protested. "No!" they objected. "We wish to go with you to your people!"

Naomi realized the futility of their proposition. She argued with them. She gave them several logical reasons why they should not return with her, but go back to their own mothers. They are young enough to remarry and have children. She, on the other hand, is seemingly without hope. Naomi is bitter. She blames God for her current plight, saying, "the hand of the Lord has turned against me." For whatever reason, God seems to have taken away from Naomi all the things that made her whole. Now, she is returning to her land, empty and bitter.

After hearing Naomi's arguments, the two young women cry again. Orpah has been persuaded by her mother-in-law. She kisses Naomi, and suddenly she is gone from our text. Orpah here is a model of obedience. She does everything that society, custom and the authority figures in her life expect her to do. We do not know what happened to her after she left Naomi and Ruth in her tearful farewell. No one chose to tell her story. To us she represents the many women who have followed the traditional life-styles and are silenced in our world, who may feel that there is no one interested in hearing their stories. Orpah is not condemned by the storyteller. Nor should we condemn her. The Orpahs as well as the Ruths among us deserve to be remembered and celebrated.

As Ruth watched her sister-in-law go, she clung to Naomi. But Naomi said to her, "See? Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. You too must go. Do the logical thing, Ruth. Return after your sister-in-law." Ruth however, responds with indignation. Naomi wants her to abandon her present loyalties and turn her back on her previous commitments. It is as if Ruth were saying, "Don't expect me to change my primary allegiance or forsake you. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried." She

also says, if we translate the Hebrew literally, "Your God, my God. Your people, my people." She has already committed herself to the God of Israel and the people of Israel. In effect Ruth says to Naomi, "Your God is my God, and your people are my people; therefore, where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge." Ruth ends her speech with an oath, using the formal name of God "Yahweh." There is no doubt of the force and validity of Ruth's words.

Ruth's decision is based not on logic but on loyalty and love. Her choice to go with Naomi is an act of "hesed," showing love and loyalty, above and beyond what is considered normal or expected. In journeying to Judah, Ruth would be a foreigner, a despised Moabite and a poor widow. Naomi's protests were finally silenced and together they continued on the journey to Bethlehem.

When the two finally arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was roused by their coming. The townswomen exclaimed, "Is this Naomi?" Gone for many years, Naomi's return caused quite a stir. Without husband or sons, and following along at her heels, a Moabite woman, Naomi was certainly the talk of the town. She exclaimed, "Do not call me sweet (as her name means in Hebrew), but call me Mara, or bitter. The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." She blames the Lord for the bitterness and emptiness that she feels. Naomi does not feel sweet. In fact, life for her has been anything but sweet. And notice she does not even ask or expect God to come to her aid. It is possible she believes that her loss of her husband and sons is a result of divine judgment on her. That somehow, she deserves punishment for some wrong.

So deep is her grief and despair, she does not even recognize the support, love and loyalty that she has received from her daughter-in-law Ruth. As she speaks to the women of Bethlehem, Naomi does not even acknowledge Ruth's presence. In her present state of grief, Naomi's feelings of emptiness have not been affected at all by Ruth's pledge of undying loyalty.

Naomi is in need of redemption. Her situation cries out for reversal and recovery. Her faith in God has been shattered by the loss of her men. In the coming chapters of the Book of Ruth, we will eventually see her let go of her bitterness, how this emptiness she currently feels will be filled with new life. Her own redemption will in fact be the first step in the redemption of all God's people.

But for now, Naomi's story is bittersweet. While we see much more of the bitter part, we must also realize the sweet part. That through her example, Ruth came to know the God of Israel. For ten years Ruth watched and learned from her mother-in-law. She saw in Naomi a faith that was so strong, that Ruth choose to give up her own people and her own gods to follow Naomi, to be with her people and her God.

In fact, Ruth, in the end, was able to show to Naomi the kind of loyalty and loving kindness, the "hesed" that only comes from God. Ruth has epitomized for us what Jesus meant when he told his disciples to love your neighbor as yourself. Her faithfulness to Naomi mirrors God's faithfulness to us. And that faithfulness can come in various forms and from a variety of sources.

If we reflect on our own lives, more often than not, we are the receivers of "hesed" rather than the givers of it. We live bittersweet lives of faith. Riding a roller coaster of faith that ebbs and flows based on our current situations. When we are happy and blessed, more often than not we pat ourselves on the back for arriving at our blissful destination, rather than truly thanking God for the good things that we have and the good life that we live. When we are suffering and living in times of despair, we wail and bemoan the absence of God, completely ignoring the fact that God is clinging to us, as Ruth clung to Naomi. Completely oblivious to God's loving kindness and faithfulness that is right there, within our grasp.

Like Naomi, who was completely mired in her grief and emptiness, we are all in need of redemption. In the coming weeks, as we continue to study the book of Ruth, we shall come to find that through Ruth, came the redemption of all humanity. This Gentile woman, the picture of God's loyalty, will become God's instrument through whose descendants our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ came to be born.