

“Ruth: Daily Faithfulness”
Ruth 1:1-9, 15-19a, 2:1-3, 4:13-17;
Proverbs 3:1-6, Matthew 6:25-33

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Donan Nealon
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

We continue our sermon series on our stained glass windows with our Ruth window (second from the front on the east side.) One of the ways I decided to prepare for this sermon was to survey my Facebook friends about the book of Ruth. I can't remember one sermon I've heard on the book but my three friends who responded were all fairly knowledgeable about the book. One told me she heard multiple sermons on the topic. One told me she thought the book of Ruth was a favorite for many church folks, which surprised me. I was surprised by how much they knew. After all, Ruth is four chapters in the middle of some historical books: sandwiched between Judges and 1 Samuel. And yet, it's a book that a faithful generation past chose to use in creating this sanctuary for worship; something about the book of Ruth conveyed a truth that they wanted to be built into the literal structure of the building.

So, why choose Ruth? Before we get to that, we should flesh out the story of Ruth a little bit. Ruth gives us an internal dating at the very beginning of the book: *during the day when the judges ruled*. In other words, before the time of kings in Israel (like Saul, David and Solomon.) This is a time of turmoil in the land with different individuals (judges) rising up to remind the people how to be faithful for the Lord, what it looks like to be a people of the Lord when they stray. In the midst of that challenging time, we have a story with one faithful woman (Naomi), one faithful man (Boaz) and a hard-working, loyal non-Hebrew (Ruth.) Naomi's family left Israel during a time of famine and settled in Moab. While in Moab, both of Naomi's sons married native women. Then, all the men in the family died. That leaves the three women without any social or economic support. Widows were at the bottom of the social structure. Naomi wisely encourages her daughters-in-law to go back to their own families where they could be supported financially by their fathers. Who knows, they might even be able to marry again someday! One of Naomi's daughters-in-law says a tearful goodbye, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi and says the famous (Ruth 1:16): *“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”*

Naomi and Ruth return to Naomi's home in Bethlehem. They have nothing. In order to eat, Ruth goes into the fields to 'glean.' Quite simply, Ruth went to a field that was being harvested and harvested behind the harvesters. She took the crop they left. God gave his people specific instructions to leave food behind in the field (like leaving the corners un-harvested) so that those who had no other way to provide for themselves could glean. While gleaning, Ruth caught the attention of the field owner, Boaz, who cared about her well-being and told his workers to keep her safe and leave even more food behind for her. When Ruth returns home and tells Naomi about her day, Naomi commends Boaz's kindness and mentions that Boaz is a family member. Naomi encourages Ruth to return to Boaz's fields. Later, Naomi suggests to Ruth that she should remarry and encourages her to 'ask' Boaz. Of course, this is an indirect, ancient culture so Ruth doesn't just ask Boaz. Instead she visits him on the threshing floor (at

the end of harvest) and '*uncovers his feet.*' Boaz 'accepts' her proposal but wants to go through the official channels first. You see, Boaz, as a family member to Naomi, was able to play the role of '*kinsman redeemer.*' According to this law of God, land sold by a person could be bought back by a relative so as to keep the land in the family. In addition, if a man died without having a son, his brother was obligated to bear a son by his widow to prevent the family from dying out. Land and family were key to a family's well-being and God built in assurances that these two things wouldn't be threatened. Boaz knows there is a family member who is more closely related to Naomi who could redeem the land. So, he goes to the city gates and brings in the elders of the city (he wanted lots of witnesses) and asks the man if he wants to buy the land. Boaz then mentions that if he buys the land, he also needs to marry Ruth. The man initially wants the land but doesn't want to damage his own inheritance, so he allows Boaz to buy the land and marry Ruth. The end of the book tells us that Boaz and Ruth had a son who had a son who has David, the great king of Israel. This makes Boaz and Ruth David's great-grandparents.

As you've heard, Ruth is quite the drama-- full of high and lows. Why choose this story to put in stained glass? God was hardly mentioned in this story. Why memorialize it in a sanctuary in which individuals will worship God? I actually think the answer lies in the trust each character puts in God.

I can't put myself in the shoes of a twelfth century BC woman but I can extrapolate how I might feel if my husband and sons died. I would feel alone, abandoned and hopeless. I would ask, "Where is God?" Even in the 21st century when I have the rights to rebuild a life for myself without male protectors, my internal recovery would be slow and painful. Naomi herself alludes to this turmoil when she tells the people of Bethlehem upon her return, "*I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty,*" (Ruth 1:21).

In the midst of her emptiness, God provided for her. First, God provided her with Ruth, who refused to leave her side on the journey from Moab and gathered food to feed them both through gleaning Boaz's fields. Second, God provided a *kinsman redeemer* through Boaz to return property and a family lineage to Naomi. Naomi couldn't have done these things on her own. Only through the provision of God and the faithfulness of others to God's will did Naomi see restoration.

I heard once that God is the hero of every story in scripture. We like to talk about the 'heroes of the faith' and we even memorialize them in stained glass but the true hero behind every virtuous biblical character is God. Almost every hero you can think of is flawed. Take Moses who we talked about last week. Moses experienced the burning bush, saw the presence of God guide the Israelites, received the 10 commandments on Mt. Sinai, yet he doubted God's ability to provide. Who delivered the Israelites from slavery? God. Who took the Israelites into the Promised Land? God. God uses people, but He is the hero. He is the redeemer.

I chose the gospel lesson today because I felt like Jesus' words in Sermon on the Mount are timeless. I can imagine Jesus speaking them to Naomi as she leaves Moab

to return to her hometown. I can also imagine Jesus speaking them to me when I'm awakened at 3am by my 17 month old daughter and think of a long day that is stretched ahead of me. I can imagine Jesus speaking them to a family who doesn't know how they will pay their bills this month and is worried about ending up living out of their car. Jesus' says to each, "*Do not worry but seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.*"

We memorialize individuals like Moses and Ruth not because they are heroes but because they embody a daily faithfulness to trust in Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount. They seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness. They are not perfect, but they are faithful to be the people that God has called them to be.

For me, the story of Ruth is the story of three people choosing the ways of God over their own fears. Naomi chooses to believe in the provision of God through the laws God set up, like gleaning and land redemption. Ruth chooses to follow Naomi's God out of her own land, her own people, and probably her own gods. Boaz chooses to trust God's law through fulfilling the role of kinsman redeemer. Each one could have made different, even more logical choices but each chose God's kingdom as they best understood it.

As I reflect on the story of Ruth and Naomi I wonder, where are places in our own lives that God is calling us to put our trust in him, like Naomi or Ruth? For Naomi and Ruth, they were trusting God with their very lives. For me, it's easy to read these stories and categorize them as fable: a good story with a message that God is good. I think, "Isn't that a nice thought?" and move on to worrying about my own life. I don't think Ruth is a fable. Instead, I wonder if God really wants us to grapple with ways that we need to trust Him with the realities of our lives.

I've been reading Dallas Willard's '*Divine Conspiracy*' this summer and he drives home the point that Jesus was the smartest man who ever lived. We think of Jesus as a good teacher or a nice person, but smart? Brilliant? We don't usually put smart and brilliant with holy and good. Yet, why would we want to put our trust in someone who is just good or nice? Why would we ever want to follow someone who is just good or nice?

For Naomi, God and his laws were the path to her redemption. Faithfulness was her key to living life again. Do we equate faithfulness (active trust in God's ways) with life? Or, do we believe we alone have what we need to make the best life possible? Naomi didn't have it. Ruth didn't have it. They desperately needed God. Boaz didn't. He sounds like he has a good life but without his faithfulness to God he wouldn't be the great-grandfather to David.

I can say to you that, left to my own devices, I don't have the intelligence, willpower, or strength to live this life. Only through the grace of God do I have any of these things. God calls me to trust him every day with my family and my livelihood.

Sometimes these daily calls to faithfulness seem small but I think it is through these seemingly small, daily acts that we build our faith muscles. I have two examples for you today that exemplify what I think are acts of daily faith.

The first is from my favorite documentary about Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa is talking about her call to Calcutta which followed a period of service at an all-girls school in India. Her fellow sisters thought she was too delicate for the work in the streets. Yet, Mother Teresa insisted on being faithful to God's call. She travels to Calcutta by herself and starts walking the street to find people who need care. She says in an interview, "If I hadn't picked up that first dying man, I wouldn't have picked up anyone." She didn't know she would establish the Sisters of Charity nuns around the world. She didn't know the millions of people she would help. She was faithful to God's call by picking up one dying man.

My second example is from a student I work with through my job with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Washington State University. This spring we spent time talking about money and God's kingdom, specifically how we could be grateful for and generous with what we have. One student wrote her experience out in her own words:

Money has quite the tendency to burn a hole in my pocket, and that habit caught up with me big time this semester. Quite frankly, I ran out of money and it's been pretty stressful trying to figure out how to take care of rent, tuition, food, etc. So any time I am convicted to give money to the poor, I have used the excuse that I have no money to spare. During [InterVarsity's] Winter Conference I was especially feeling the money pinch. But instead of tuning out since I couldn't give any money, I found myself incredibly compelled by [the speaker's] talk. During prayer I decided to give my finances to God and trust that He would help me. When our chapter decided to set a goal of raising \$50 per person for SpeakUp [an international poverty relief organization], I felt God tell me that I would raise all \$50, and that if I gave what I could spare he would help me reach the goal.

So I tried it out; I tried trusting God even though I was terrified about it. With the cash I had in my pocket I had exactly enough to buy groceries for that week. Several times in the last few weeks God has unexpectedly provided money for expenses, and shown me His love through friends who have helped me out. I've gone through my belongings and found things I really don't need, and put the money towards SpeakUp. And just this afternoon the change in my pocket was exactly the amount I needed to park on campus. Where I was afraid to trust God with my finances, he provided in every way I could have imagined. Where I started out feeling powerless and anxious from lack of money, I have become incredibly peaceful and close to God! And on top of everything, I tallied up my jar this weekend and found his provision has SURPASSED my goal for SpeakUp! Praise God!!

So I leave with you the question: in what places is God calling you to trust Him in your daily life?



Stained Glass Windows of First Presbyterian Church

RUTH

Our sanctuary was built in 1940-42. Stained glass windows were planned as important features, and were provided by gifts, bequests, and memorials. The windows were installed from 1942-1958. They were created by Charles J. Connick and associates of Boston.

The second window from the front on the east side of the sanctuary portrays Ruth (Book of Ruth). Ruth holds stalks of barley gleaned in the fields of Boaz. The water pitcher Ruth is holding represents temperance and also suggests the Waters of Life. Around her are symbols for the "fruit of the spirit" which Paul listed in his letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:22-23):

- Goodness (lilies)
- Joy (bells)
- Peace (dove)
- Faith (cross)
- Love (flaming rose)
- Meekness and gentleness (lamb and violets)
- Patience (heavenly crown)

The round medallions represent the genealogy of Jesus. The harp represents David, Ruth's great-grandson. The monogram, containing the letters of Maria, is a design that has stood for "Ave Maria Regina" since medieval times. The crown and scepter in the lower medallion represent our Lord, the King of Kings.

The window was given by the Daughters of Ruth class in memory of Mrs. J. G. (Polly) Eldridge. It is signed "Connick Associates Boston 1950."