

“Learning to Love”

November 15, 2015

Ruth series

Hesed. It's not a word you hear every day, but it's an important word for us. *Hesed* is a Hebrew word that means loving-kindness on God's terms – that unmerited steadfast love that God shows to us. In Ruth, we see God's *hesed* playing out in this family through their interactions with each other. Naomi finds family and hope after losing so much. Ruth finds security and protection even as an outsider. Boaz finds a companion and family.

Love - not sweet, sappy love - but God's love works in their lives and transforms them. It's love that brings hope. It's each of them going beyond what they had to do that brings hope to their lives. Ruth could've stayed home, but she went with Naomi and helped both of them to survive. Naomi could've continued to be bitter and wrapped up in self-pity, but she helped Ruth to find a good husband. Boaz didn't have to care for Ruth, but instead of treating her as an outsider, he accepted her and cared for her and Naomi.

It is love that brings us hope. And learning to love is a ride that we're on if we've decided to follow Jesus or if we're wondering what that might mean. It is this *hesed* - God's steadfast and never-failing love - that brings us here, keeps us going, and makes us believe that God's love will win. And learning to love from God will make a difference in our lives and in the world. Writer Natalie Angier says, “Hard as it may be to believe in these days of infectious greed and sabers unsheathed, scientists have discovered that the small, brave act of cooperating with another person, of choosing trust over cynicism, generosity over selfishness, makes the brain light up with quiet joy.”

I offer this to us as we pray for people in Paris, in Lebanon, and everywhere around the world, as we grieve with those who have lost loved ones in violent attacks, as we shake our heads and wonder why and wonder how many more will die. How will we respond?

Prayer matters. And I know that our witness of showing up and worshiping and praying and seeking God's reign matters. It reminds us who we are and how God calls us to stand with love against hate in whatever form it takes - not just what we see outside of ourselves across the world, but the stuff inside of us, too.

In a world where we get hung up over Starbucks coffee cups that don't say “Merry Christmas,” I hope that we could be more concerned about living out the reality of Christmas - that the light has come into the world and the darkness cannot put it out. You and I are called to be light in the world where it sometimes seems so very dark. I

needed to remember what it means that Jesus is Emmanuel - God is with us - as I saw the news.

I hope we can be more concerned about the call of Jesus to follow him and be disciples. I hope that we could be more concerned about the mission Jesus gives us - to make disciples for the transformation of the world. It's clear that the world has yet to be fully transformed into what God intends. We're called to be channels of God's love and grace, to believe that love and grace can triumph over hate, and to put our trust in God whose love went as far as love can possibly go - to the cross.

And Ruth reminds us of love. In Jewish culture, the Book of Ruth is traditionally read during the Feast of Weeks. It is a festival – a celebration after the grain harvest. It fits that a story of commitment – of love and loyalty – would be read during a time when the people celebrate God's faithfulness. And as we look forward to a Thanksgiving feast, Ruth reminds us of God's faithfulness in our lives - that *hesed*.

Last week, we focused on Ruth's commitment to Naomi and to the God of Israel. In a time of extreme uncertainty – a famine in the land, grief over the death of loved ones, and political upheaval – Ruth leaves behind her life to go with Naomi. Ruth says, "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." Commitment is a choice that we make – not something that just happens naturally.

But the future for Naomi and Ruth was uncertain. How will they survive? Without the support of men, how will they make it? When Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, Naomi tells her friends to call her Mara, which means bitter. Naomi is bitter because she feels like God has taken everything away from her. She is empty-handed and empty in spirit.

Survival for widows in this time was limited – they could either beg for help or glean in the fields after the workers had gone through to collect the grain. Ruth goes to the fields to glean whatever grain she can to provide for her and Naomi. She happens to end up in Boaz's field, who is a Naomi's relative on her husband's side. Boaz notices Ruth's character – her commitment to Naomi and her hard work as she picks grain in his fields. He blesses her and allows her to continue to glean from his fields. Naomi begins to see God's hand working in their lives.

Then, Naomi encourages Ruth to go to Boaz while he is at the threshing floor. In those days, a landowner and his workers would stay near their grain after the harvest to make sure it wasn't stolen. It was a time of celebration.

Boaz makes a pledge to care for Ruth, but he says that he must first check with the closest relative about buying Naomi's land and marrying Ruth. Even so, Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with grain as a sign of his pledge to her and Naomi.

Boaz goes through a detailed legal procedure to redeem Naomi's family property and to marry Ruth. Their relative closer in line than Boaz agrees to buy the land, but he doesn't want to marry Ruth. So Boaz is able to fulfill his pledge. Like Ruth, he is a person of deep commitment, and their love and marriage shows God's provision and protection.

So there's a happy ending. What began with tragedy – famine and death – ends with a new marriage, a new child, and a great sense of hope. Naomi is filled after being empty. Her family is redeemed. Ruth and Boaz have each other. Ruth bears a son named Obed, whose son is Jesse, whose father is David. Ruth is the great grandmother of King David. All of Israel will be redeemed through David's rule. David is the king who will bring a time of rest for the people. He will bring unity and peace.

So we all love a happy ending, but remember the cultural issues that were a part of this story. Israelites and Moabites were enemies. Ruth and Boaz are faithful and want to do what is right. It is love that qualifies us to be God's servants – not our physical ancestry or faith history. Ruth is praised among the community for redeeming Naomi – for being faithful to her and giving her hope.

The genealogy in Ruth is important. In this family tree, there is an affirmation that God includes all people – whatever their background – to bring about God's purposes. Ruth, a Moabite, someone outside of God's people, stands in the line of King David. "Ordinary people, but people who go beyond what the law requires to act with compassion for others, are the ancestors of kings." And beyond King David, these men and women stand in the line of Jesus Christ.

God is kind of an invisible actor in the story of Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi, but the sense of God's love – that *hesed* – is very much visible. Perhaps it's the same for us. We don't always notice God's presence in our stories for what it is until we look back and understand that God was with us through the most desperate times we faced.

The story of Ruth is certainly about human faithfulness, loyalty, and love. Yet it's not those attributes that bring about God's faithfulness. God loves and provides regardless of our behavior. Each of us is a witness to that – we have been blessed without our deserving to be blessed. That's grace.

But I believe it is true that God's love is easier to see and experience when we are faithful to one another – when we uphold our vows to love and honor one another, when we take seriously the responsibility to love and nurture one another in our families, when we respect our co-workers, when we treat one another as beloved children of God. God uses you and me to communicate God's love in the world. God depends on you and me to walk it and talk it. So we are to be like Ruth and Boaz – showing compassion and kindness.

Perhaps it's a lesson about how we are to show hesed – steadfast love – to one another. Our faith story is full of surprises on how God will provide – even through a woman no one would've picked to be an ancestor of Jesus. One commentator writes, "The family and the church are both places where we have the opportunity to learn to live with people we did not choose. Our fidelity to those we are stuck with can be a reflection of the fidelity of a God who is stuck with us all."

God blesses and redeems us through people who are open and willing to be used for God's purposes. And we're called to be those kind of people - who respond to hesed - God's steadfast love - and reflect it in our world. Praise God who doesn't give up on us and who calls us to trust in that steadfast love and grace!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.