

“Committed”

November 8, 2015

Ruth series

A pastor-friend said that when people are new to the Bible and want to know where to start, he tells them to begin with Ruth. I thought it was a strange place to start, but he disagreed. He said, “Ruth is all about commitment, and that’s what people need to know.”

So we read about Ruth – about commitment - after looking at stewardship and faith commitment. Last week, we celebrated our saints – people who remind us to be committed to God. Yes, saints are people who have gone onto glory, but Scripture calls us to live as the saints of God even now – as people who believe in God and seek to follow God. For the next two weeks, we’ll look at Ruth, her family, how love and commitment play out in their lives, and how God is at work in them – and us!

The story of Ruth happens when the Judges ruled in Israel. This was a dark period of Israel’s history – full of moral decline and oppression and full of political, economic, and spiritual uncertainty and instability. Israel would be faithful to God for a while, but then they’d forget God. God’s punishment was thought to be a neighboring nation conquering Israel and ruling over them until they repented. Then, God would forgive Israel and raise up a judge to help Israel conquer their enemy –judges like Deborah, Gideon, or Samson.

So it’s a volatile situation, but there are cultural issues, too. Israelites and Moabites were enemies. Moabites were thought to be from Lot’s line and his daughters. In Deuteronomy 23, the Law declares that Moabites aren’t allowed to enter the assembly of the Lord – even to the tenth generation! It was said that Moabites didn’t help the Israelites when they came out of Egypt, and even swore a curse on them. Israelites had invaded Moabite towns. Not a good start to a lasting relationship!

But we’re told that Elimelech and Naomi are escaping a famine in Canaan, so they’re even willing to go into Moab - enemy territory. Elimelech dies in Moab, and Naomi is left with two sons. They marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The marriage isn’t forbidden, but probably not encouraged. When the sons die, Naomi is left with these two daughters-in-law. They are three widows who must survive with no support in a man’s world. The promise of new life is lost after their struggle.

Naomi hears that the famine has ended, so she plans to go back home to Canaan. She tells the Orpah and Ruth to go back to their families because she has nothing to offer them. For women without a husband or father or family base, survival was next to

impossible. And besides, it may prove difficult to take Moabites back to Canaan with her.

Orpah leaves Naomi, but Ruth refuses to go home. And she 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.” Ruth’s words are read at weddings to demonstrate commitment and devotion between two people, but these words don’t come out of the joy of starting life together. It’s actually pretty awful! I wonder: how many people know they are from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law? The sacrifice and commitment are deep and real here.

Ruth is the shortest book in the Old Testament – only four chapters – but its message is powerful. Some scholars believe that the Book of Ruth was written after the Israelites had returned home from exile. There was a push to reclaim religious and cultural identity as Israelites, and it was a time when some priests were reacting unfavorably to “outsiders.” In essence, Ruth is thought to be a reaction to xenophobia – the fear of the outsider or the stranger – the other.

Friends, it’s not too far a step for Ruth to challenge us to consider how we view those who are outsiders. Current discussions around immigration and refugees are sometimes covered in a similar fear of the other. We quickly forget that our faith history is built around people seeking new land and new life. It challenges us to think about who God calls us to be and how God calls us to treat one another. It challenges me to think about Ruth’s commitment to Naomi - and God’s commitment to all of us - not because of who we are or what we’ve done, but because of who God is.

Ruth makes me think about people and grace and how God works in ways we never imagined. My best friend growing up whose mom who was from the Philippines and graciously opened her home to me. I didn’t learn until later that she was called names at school because she was different. A young woman in our community who was a refugee after spending time in a holding cell. My family – Ivan, his parents, his brothers – and what they’ve endured leaving home and coming to a new place.

Speaking from personal experience having married an immigrant to this country, we can’t generalize when it comes to any group wherever they’re from, whatever their faith tradition, or any other part of who they are. Many of us can’t imagine the struggles that people have to leave their home and seek another. What is our calling as people who seek love God and love each other for God’s sake? How do we seek justice for all?

Ruth shows that God’s grace is active in places we might not expect – and in people we might not expect! God’s grace is for all people. Ruth is one who shows deep-down faith when the situation is dismal and hopeless. Even more, Ruth’s love for Naomi

offers a picture of God's love that goes far beyond what we can imagine! When Ruth pledges her loyalty to Naomi, she leaves her family and her homeland – her security – and accepts Israel's God.

There are no easy choices here. It's a risk and a gamble because the future with Naomi is very uncertain. Ruth is a foreigner and may not be well-received in Canaan. She isn't required or expected to go with Naomi. Yet, she does more than what is required of her to help Naomi.

We don't know Ruth's motives. Perhaps she knows that Naomi is deeply grieved and needs someone to comfort her. Perhaps she can't go back home because of her marriage to an Israelite. Perhaps she has found something in the God of Israel that she cherishes enough to leave her old way of life.

In the end, her motives aren't so important. What's important is that Ruth reflects God's faithfulness and God's love. In a time when everything around her is unstable – her husband has died, her family is splitting up, and God's people are not showing true faith, Ruth demonstrates the commitment that God calls us to have. It's commitment that requires trust in God and sacrifice for the sake of others – that love of God and love of neighbor that God commands.

Even though Ruth stands outside of Israel's circle, **she** is the one who shows what it means to love God and neighbor. **She** is the one who reminds us that commitment isn't something we're born into. Commitment is a choice that we make – whether it be to family, friends, God, church, career, or something else. Many times we see faith and commitment in unexpected places, and even if it's unclaimed, I'd call it God's grace at work. Maybe we make the connection and tell that person that they're showing grace even if they don't believe it.

Commitment takes time and work. Commitment requires that we look beyond ourselves to the needs of others. When we look at our faith history, Ruth offers hope in a difficult time. Ruth shows faithfulness and holiness in a world where it's lacking and desperately needed.

And our world is no different. We need to see people of faith, and we need to be people of faith. We need to remember that God doesn't leave us when times are tough. God doesn't stay with us because God has to. God wants to be with us and help us and offer us grace.

Studying Ruth forced me to think about my own commitments – and what they require of me. First, to be committed to Jesus Christ - to recognize my need for him in my life - to save me from my selfishness and save me for furthering what he calls me to - love, justice, grace, mercy. It's a daily call that's renewed over and over again.

Commitment to God and the church requires me to take my role as a pastor and as a part of the church seriously. Simply saying membership vows when I was a teenager doesn't mean that I'm committed to God and the church. Carrying out the vows – offering our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness is what commitment requires of me. Being born into a religious family doesn't make us committed Christians; it is our own willingness to let God form us in faith and use us as servant-disciples.

Honoring my marriage and family means that we spend time together - eating dinner at the table, talking, playing. Honoring my family means that I call my parents to check in, write my grandma a card, or send an E-mail to my sisters. Honoring friends means that we use whatever means we can to stay in touch. It means listening to struggles, being compassionate, offering advice, and praying for them.

Ruth is a fresh look at the nature of commitment. Even today, there are places in the world where the decision to follow Jesus Christ means that people leave home and family behind. For some of us, following Jesus means strained relationships and difficult conversations with people we love.

When we make a commitment to Jesus Christ, our lives change. We are a community of people who seek God's help and hope for our lives, who seek forgiveness and mercy through Christ, and who seek to be guided by the Holy Spirit.

Some days that's not so easy! We have to turn away from temptations like trusting in things and not in God, give us guilt and sin that eat away at us, and stop living our lives as if we can do it all on our own without guidance. We have to build community with one another – people we don't know or understand, people who are different from us. Ruth challenges us to embrace the changes with hope for what God can do.

We'll continue our study of Ruth again next week, but I invite you to take time to read the whole book – just four chapters. Let it remind you of your commitments – what's important to you and what your commitments require of you.

Ruth's loyalty is no small act of commitment. It's a powerful act of love and grace.

May our commitments reflect God's commitment to each of us.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.