

“A Story of Ruth”

The Book of Ruth in the Old Testament is an example of short story at its very best. It’s an artistic gem – an enchanting story that portrays life during the time of the Judges in the Old Testament, though it was written many years later. The book is beautiful in its simplicity, portraying country life and customs among the common people of that time.

A man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons leave their native town of Bethlehem in Judah during a famine, and settle in the country of Moab, where food is more plentiful. However, after moving to Moab, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi and their 2 sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

Later, Naomi’s two Hebrew sons marry Moabite girls, one named Orpah, and the other named Ruth. But it isn’t long before life takes another tragic turn for Naomi, as both of her sons die, leaving only herself and her two widowed Moabite daughters-in-law. It was as though the sun had gone down forever on Naomi, Orpah and Ruth. The men are gone from the family. The wound is even deeper because there were no male children born – no one in whom their deceased husbands could, in a sense, live on. No heirs. With no welfare, no Social Security, as today, each was doomed to a life of poverty and loneliness, scraping out a meager existence the best they could, trying to maintain a sense of self-worth and value.

The Hebrew woman Naomi, feeling like she had little to live for, sought consolation in returning to her home town of Bethlehem. Sadly, she urges her foreign daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, and return to their former homes. After some coaxing, Orpah agrees, and leaves Naomi. But, in a memorable passage, Ruth declares her devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi. She will not leave her. “Do not press me to leave you, 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, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (Ruth 1:16-17).

So, the two women make their way to Bethlehem, getting there during the time of the barley harvest. In order to have food to eat, Ruth obtains permission to glean in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s deceased husband Elimelech. Since Ruth is a foreigner, a Moabite woman in Hebrew country, she’s taking a risk, going into the fields to glean. But Boaz is impressed by her virtue. He goes out of his way to be kind to her, and protect her.

Because Boaz is a relative of her deceased husband, Naomi tries to arrange a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. Boaz is willing, and he does marry Ruth, after a closer relative waives his right to buy the family property and marry Ruth. Ruth and Boaz eventually have a son, Obed. Naomi is delighted, too. For the family line of *her husband* is preserved, and she thinks of Obed as a son of her own. Not only that: this child Obed eventually becomes an ancestor of King David, and of the Messiah, who would come from the ancestry of David.

Ruth – a foreigner – a sometimes despised Moabite – is given a place in the ancestral line that eventually gives birth to the Messiah!

The Book of Ruth is a story beautifully told. There's no villain. No sinister plot. No great evil inflicted on anyone. Just the narrative highlighting the decency and devotion of Naomi and Orpah and Boaz, and the love and loyalty of this foreigner named Ruth.

Besides being a charming story, as part of Scripture, the Word of God, what is it God wants to tell us through this ancient tale? *First, I believe it reminds us of the value and importance of human loyalties.* Ruth displays an amazing loyalty to her mother-in-law. She's not *obligated* to stay with her Hebrew mother-in-law. When Naomi decided to go back to her home town of Bethlehem, Ruth could have easily decided to stay in her homeland, Moab. Losing her husband was bad enough, but having to move to a foreign country on top of that? But her loyalty to her mother-in-law won the day! So, she stuck with Naomi. "Where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge...your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16).

The faithful bond between Ruth and Naomi would be something similar to an American Christian woman living in Pakistan, deciding to move back to the United States, and having her widowed Hindu Pakistani daughter-in-law say, "I'm moving to the United States with you, and your Christian God will be my God."

Life turns sour when simple human loyalties are forgotten. *There is the loyalty of parents to children, and children to parents.* If parents have done their best to nurture and care for their children, sacrifice for them, there is no excuse for a grown son or daughter to be so into themselves that they don't even bother to call mom or dad, to check on them, to stand by them when they age and perhaps become frail or ill.

Likewise, parents can maintain a loyalty to their grown children by helping them out in those times when their children face adversity and can use some help. Over many years of ministry, and meeting a lot of people, I've seen beautiful examples of parents sticking by their children, and children demonstrating a great loyalty and love for their parents.

There is the loyalty of a husband to his wife, and a wife to her husband. Marriage is not only romance, and the emotion of passionate lovers. It's faithfulness, loyalty between husband and wife. Loyalty is one of the foundation stones on which a solid marriage is built. These words are part of the marriage ceremony:

"(Name), I take you to be my wedded husband/wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance, *and thereto I pledge you my faith.*" (Or, my "faithfulness").

When a man and a woman are loyal to one another through happiness and sorrow, good times and bad times, they are able to walk toward the sunset, arm in arm, with the deep satisfaction of being *loyal companions* on life's journey.

Our human loyalties to one another help make life worth living! Think of the importance of

politicians being loyal to those who have elected them. Of friends remaining loyal to one another even when disagreements and misunderstandings arise. Of employees remaining loyal to the company that hired them, and companies remaining loyal to those employees who give an honest day's work day in and day out. Of the importance of church members demonstrating their loyalty to one another by upholding each other in prayer, helping each other when needed, rejoicing together and weeping together.

And then, of course, there is the matter of our loyalty to God and to our Savior. Promises, perhaps, that we made to God when we joined the church, or were baptized, or had our children baptized. That moment, when we gave our life to Christ, and wanted to live as a Christian, and give to God our very best. It's so easy to stray from that place, and get sidetracked on other things.

And our loyalty to the church, the Body of Christ. To be in God's house, faithfully. To support the church with our "prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service". We live in a time of church-hopping and church-shopping. Where people's loyalty to a particular congregation is thin and fragile – just move on if a church doesn't "meet our needs".

God is faithful to us. Our loyalty to Him is a way we can show our love for God.

The story of Ruth reminds us of the importance of human loyalties. But it also gives us a picture of *love that overcomes prejudices*. One of the emphases in the Book of Ruth seems to be that Ruth is a *foreigner*. When Boaz shows kindness to her, Ruth is appreciative, and says: "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a *foreigner*" (Ruth 2:10). Boaz's kindness to Ruth transcended national boundaries.

This reminds us of the story Jesus told, the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a man is beat up and robbed as he travels on a road, and while some religious people pass by without helping, the only one who comes to his aid is a despised, half-breed Samaritan. According to Jesus, anyone in need is our neighbor.

The alternative to a love that transcends race, color, nationality, creed is prejudice. Basically, prejudice means to "pre-judge". We make judgments before the facts are known, or we hold a preconceived idea even if it conflicts with the truth.

We can have many kinds of prejudices. We can be prejudiced against people with tattoos. Gay people. Blacks. We can be prejudiced against Republicans...or Democrats. Against rich people, or people who use food stamps. And so on, and on. I once watched a foreign film, where an old man is telling his grandson how evil and deceitful Jews are. After a while the young boy piped up, "But wasn't Jesus a Jew?" The old man was rather silent.

We can judge people even though we don't know them. We form opinions just because of the way they look, or what they wear, or one thing they may have said. (Actually, we may not like a person because sub-consciously that individual might remind us of someone else we don't like,

or we can see in that person some of *our own* traits that we sub-consciously despise)!

Prejudice is a destructive thing. Many years ago a black man, Dr. Charles Drew, developed a method of blood plasma transfusion that has saved countless lives. We can never begin to know how many people owe their lives to this man and his discovery. Once Dr. Drew was traveling in the south, and was involved in an automobile accident that severed a large blood vessel. He was rushed to the nearest hospital, but because he was black he was refused admission. Dr. Drew *died* because he couldn't get the help of *his own medical discovery*.

We may think: Well, I'm not prejudiced. But we all are, to some extent. How can we overcome our prejudices? *The first step is to admit them, and be on guard against them.* Gerald Kennedy, a noted United Methodist bishop, had some wise words on this matter. He said, "I know I am prejudiced. The only safety is the realization that my mind works that way and to be on guard. There are certain subjects I have the greatest difficulty in considering objectively. There are certain words which trigger my opposition and certain people who make me want to disagree no matter what they say." He goes on to say that we have to be careful or we will find ourselves walled in by our prejudices. Admitting our prejudices is the first step in overcoming them.

Secondly, prejudice can sometimes be overcome by knowledge – just learning the facts. I had a man in one of my congregations early on who was the nicest guy. He was a Christian. I got along with him. But, oh, was he prejudiced against black people, especially interracial marriages. He quoted some part of the Book of Genesis to back up his stiff resistance to interracial marriages. He pointed out that nature different kinds of birds don't intermix to bear their young. Well, in my opinion, his argument from nature proves nothing. His interpretation of Genesis would not hold up under any kind of sound biblical scholarship.

Someone has said: "People are usually down on what they are not up on." Unfortunately, this kind of prejudice is not dead. I know several people in interracial marriages, and they speak of stares, the whispers, the cutting remarks and even threats they've received in public.

Prejudices again persons can sometimes be overcome by getting to know those people. Fear, suspicion can often be dispersed when we discover that another person has the same hopes and heartaches, the same fears and failings, the same dreams and disappointments as we do. A youth conference was held in the area where I was serving a church. People in our local churches were asked to house youth who would be coming in from out of town for the conference. One active church family refused to offer their home because they were afraid a black teenager might be assigned to stay in their home overnight. How sad is that, when Jesus followers ought to be leading the way towards loving one another. Hopefully our country has progressed in the area of racial justice. But there are still other prejudices we can cling to that hurt people, and destroy the goodness of life.

The Book of Ruth is a beautifully told story that should impress on us the importance of our human loyalties to one another, and how Christlike love can erase the prejudices that we hold.

