

Unlikely Friends: Ruth and Naomi

First Sunday after Easter ~ April 18, 2004

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Proverbs 17:17

¹⁷ A friend loves at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

Ruth 1:1-5, 15-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

[After the deaths of her husband and both sons, Naomi decided to return to Israel, her home. Her daughters-in-law accompanied her for awhile. But Naomi told the women to stay in Moab, so Orpah turned around and headed home.]

¹⁵ So she [Naomi] said [to Ruth], “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said,

“Do not press me to leave you
or 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.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

When did Ruth and Naomi live?

Ruth and Naomi lived more than 3,000 years ago during the period in Israel's history known as the time of the judges. It was a violent age, as Israel sought to complete its conquest of Canaan, the land promised them by God. The Israelites had no king, for God was to be their king. Instead, the chief administrators were known as judges, and their stories are told in the OT book of Judges. Samson, Gideon, Deborah and others were judges during this time.

The time of the judges was also marked by great faithlessness, as the Israelites descended down a spiral that would lead them further and further from God. The last verse of Judges is a biting indictment of the Israelites: “In those days there was no king of Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

The faithfulness of Ruth and Naomi, to God and to each other, is in stark contrast with the faithlessness of Israel. Perhaps this is partly why the story of their friendship was cherished and passed on.

Today begins a new sermon series: Friendship and Faithfulness. We begin with the story of Ruth and Naomi, who became kin through marriage, but friends through tragedy.

In the coming weeks, we'll be looking at the Bible's teachings about friendship. You might think that this would mean looking at various biblical “principles.” But it does not. God doesn't really teach us in that way. The Bible is largely a book of stories meant to be understood within the larger story of God's work in this world. So we'll be looking at biblical stories of friends, considering how we can find ourselves in these stories and learn something about the true meaning of friendship.

The story of Ruth and Naomi

The story of Naomi (and it is Naomi's story despite the name of the book) is about the power of God, working through Ruth's faithful friendship, to redeem Naomi from bitterness and despair.

Naomi and her husband were living in Israel when a famine drove them to leave their home and head southeastward to Moab. There they made a new home, where all was well until Naomi's husband died. Yet even after Elimelech's death, Naomi was all right. Though a widow, she had two able sons to provide for her and to protect her. Her sons married local women, Orpah¹ and Ruth.

But ten years later, tragedy struck Naomi again. Now, Naomi's sons were dead and the three widows were left alone. In the ancient world, being without a husband or sons was about as big a tragedy as might befall a woman.² Naturally, Naomi decided to head back to Israel, hoping to find family and rebuild her life. Naomi was accompanied by her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. But, taking pity on them, Naomi urged them to turn around and stay in Moab. So Orpah headed home . . . but Ruth did not. Instead, Ruth pledged to follow Naomi, going where Naomi goes, worshiping Naomi's god as her own. But this was not the end of their story, but only the beginning.

Upon their arrival in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, these two unlikely friends set about the rebuilding of their lives. Given all she had been through, it is no surprise that Naomi was deeply embittered: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty," she told the women in Bethlehem. Naomi, whose name meant "sweetness," even wanted to take a new name, Mara, based on the Hebrew word for "bitter." Naomi was in great need of restoration and renewal – she needed to be redeemed.

Redemption

The words "redeem" or "redeemer" are used more 20 times in this brief story. Redemption refers to the process of restoring what has been lost or stolen or captured. In the ancient world, a kinsman-redeemer was one who recovered property or prestige that the family had lost.

One important portrait of God woven throughout the Bible is that of Holy Redeemer. The focus here is on *freedom*. God was Israel's strong Redeemer, who had delivered them from slavery in Egypt. In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Boaz is the kinsman-redeemer of Ruth. Ruth's child will be the redeemer of Naomi. But we need to see God at work in this story. Ruth, and her friendship with Naomi, is God's instrument used to accomplish Naomi's redemption. For Israel, what God had done for Naomi, he would do for his people.

Despite Naomi's despair, Ruth decided to go into the fields, gathering what grain was left by the harvesters, hoping that someone would notice her. Someone did. Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's, not only noticed Ruth, he eventually married her. How their union comes about is a touching, and somewhat complicated, story that consumes much of the book.

After the marriage, we are told that "when they came together, the LORD made her conceive and she bore a son" (Ruth 4:13). The women of Bethlehem knew that this child, Ruth's son, would be Naomi's redeemer, legally bound to look after her in her old age, saving her from the ravages of widowhood. But this was no mere legal matter. We understand this when we are told that "Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse." This tiny infant, a gift given to Ruth by God, is a gift also given to Naomi, a gift that will make her whole.

But even with this, the story is not complete. The infant, cuddled and hugged by Naomi, would grow to be the grandfather of the great King David, from whose family would come the Messiah, the one who would redeem all God's people, making them (us!) whole.

Unlikely friends

One could hardly find two people less likely to be friends. Ruth and Naomi were from different lands. They worshipped different gods. They were separated in age by a generation. Yet touched by tragedy and by God's grace, they found friendship, restoration, and renewal in each other and in God.

¹Oprah Winfrey tells the story that she was named after Orpah in the book of Ruth, but that her parents misspelled the name. (Isn't it amazing the things you learn in these studies.)

²In ancient cultures, widowhood was greatly feared. Women simply had to be under the protection of men; a woman's social standing was derived entirely from her husband's. One of the remarkable features of ancient Judaism was God's insistence that his people care for widows and orphans. Even in Jesus' day, widows didn't have a much better lot; e.g., we meet Tabitha whose life was devoted to caring for widows (Acts 9:36-43).

Daily Bible Readings

(this outline of Ruth is from Kathleen Robertson Farmer's commentary)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Ruth, Chapter 1 Turn, Turn, Turn	Day 2 Ruth, Chapter 2 Known and Unknown
Day 3 Ruth, Chapter 3 Uncovering and Recovering	Day 4 Ruth, Chapter 4 The Roots of Israel's Redemption
Day 5 A peek ahead at next week's story: Daniel 3:19-30	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Are You Part of a Sunday Morning Class?

Sunday School classes have always been a vital part of United Methodism. At St. Andrew we offer a wide variety of adult classes on Sunday morning. There are nearly twenty different classes! Whether you are looking for a discussion-oriented class that focuses on the Bible or a class that emphasizes parenting or even a lecture-oriented class, there is something for you! Information on the classes is available at the information counter in the Narthex and also on-line at

www.standrewumc.org.

Please visit one next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by reflecting upon and talking about friendships that you've formed in your own life. How many times have you been surprised by the people with whom you've developed friendships? If you look back over your own life, what friend was most different from yourself? Who has been your most "unlikely friend"? What do you think led to those friendships? Did they arise out of crisis or difficulty? How might tragedy or crisis lead to the development of deep bonds?
2. Today's story is one of redemption, salvation, and reversal. In what ways might our friends be the means of our own redemption - whether in the sense of helping us come to trust Jesus Christ or the reversal of life difficulties? You might share some stories of how your friends have helped you through difficult times or how you might have done that for a close friend of yours.
3. In his book, *The Friendship Factor*, Alan McGinnis writes that loyalty and devotion are essential to building a life-long friendship. When Ruth refuses to stay in Moab, insisting that she go to Israel with Naomi, Ruth is being loyal, not only to Naomi, but more importantly, to God. Their relationship endures the tough times. Realize that Ruth was neither legally required nor customarily expected to stay with her mother-in-law. How important do you think loyalty is to a friendship? What does it really mean to be a loyal friend? When do we know that the loyalty has become blind?