

## *A reflection of God's love*

*Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34*

Some of you may know that the name *Ruth* means “friend”. This is exactly what the story of Ruth and Naomi are about. The story demonstrates for us how God acts through Ruth to demonstrate that God is always present, even when it seems that God is hidden and nowhere to be found. The story also shows us the possibilities of what God can do when we live beyond the walls that divide us. The story of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah is a story of mixed marriage, of immigration, mixed religion, and a redefining of family and social norms. And also how the love of God transcends cultures and social expectations.

This story takes place in a time of relative peace between Israel and Moab. However, there was, as we’ve heard, a famine in Israel, and because of that, Elimelek, a citizen of Bethlehem, decided to take his family and find refuge in Moab. It should be noted that in the Hebrew scriptures – commonly known as *The Old Testament* – that there is a bias that nothing good ever came out of Moab. But due to the famine, Elimelek, Naomi and their two sons felt that they had no other choice. If they were to stay where they were, they would probably starve of hunger. So instead, they went to the place where they may or may not be welcomed. To a place that was considered an enemy of Israel. When they got to Moab, they not only found food, but they also found two women – wives for their two sons. Two Moabite women. And that’s when tragedy befell the family.

Not only does Naomi first lose her husband, but she also loses her two sons, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law – Orpah and Ruth – to their own devices. Naomi is obviously devastated. It seems that every time she turns around, something bad happens, and it leads her to believe that God – and I quote her own words – “has dealt bitterly with me”. She believed that God had dealt bitterly with her. She truly felt that she had nothing left. That her life was over, and she had nothing more to offer her daughters-in-law. So she suggests that the best course of action would be for her daughters-in-law to return to their

family of origin. Naomi pleads with them to do this. The custom at that time was that if Naomi had another son, then the daughters-in-law would marry that son and therefore be provided for. But that would logically not happen. By the time she found a husband, gave birth...by the time these sons were old enough to marry, these ladies would be older. Naomi said to them, "Are you going to wait for me to maybe have children again, and then wait for them to grow so that you can marry them? It's not fair to you. Go back to your homes."

But there was no way that Ruth was going to let that happen. Naomi needed support, and Ruth knew that. And Ruth made a very risky and very important decision. I believe that neither Orpah nor Naomi nor Ruth wanted this to happen, which is why we hear that they were crying a lot with one another, in sorrow for what they had lost together. That common experience.

I was reflecting on how many of us have an in-law that we love so much that we would cling to them and never let go. What a special, amazing relationship. Ruth, in this moving display of fidelity and affection, chooses to stay with her mother-in-law, regardless of the consequences. Ruth, who could be perceived as an enemy of Israel, is the one who ended up embodying the spirit of selfless love. A love that Jesus wishes for all of his followers to do and have, which we've heard in the Gospel lesson today. This is a story of two women from whom God works, who were able to break down the walls that potentially would divide. It is a story of someone whose *Hesed* – which is a Hebrew word meaning "steadfast love" – the *Hesed* will not be restricted by ethics or religious boundaries or cultural expectations. God's love has the power to redefine what we define as family.

What's interesting is that I find that both women ended up honouring Naomi, their elder. Ruth honours Naomi with her loyalty by saying that she will never leave her behind. That wherever she goes, she will follow. "Her God will be my God", etc. Orpah also honours Naomi by listening to her request and following through with going back to her own home. God wants us to honour each other through love.

This is also described in the Gospel lesson when Jesus is asked by the scribe what is the number one most important thing. Jesus' answer was quite simple: to love God and love your neighbour. To love God entails a complete giving on oneself to God: our whole soul and our whole spirit. Everything about us is to love God. As it says in 1 John 4:8, "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." When Jesus says that we must love our neighbour as ourselves, Jesus is talking

about this very radical welcome: the concept of welcoming all. Every time I think of this story, I am pulled back to a beautiful book by Stephanie Spellers called *Radical Welcome*. She says the following:

“The spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, the presence, the voices, the power of other people systematically cast out or marginalized by the church, a denomination, or a society. Radical welcome is concerned with the transformation and opening of individuals’ hearts. The congregations, the systems, so that the other may find in community a warm place, a mutual embrace so that you are finally free to embrace and be transformed by the authentic relationship with the margins.”<sup>1</sup>

Is that not what we witnessed between Ruth and Naomi? To love all people as God has called us to do, we need to acknowledge our fears. We need to acknowledge our own discomfort. We need to reach out and make sure that we are being radically welcoming. To become radically welcoming, though, we need to let go of our preferences in order to make room for else’s. Sarah Nichols writes:

“We have to lay down our preferences to make room for someone else who is not me. Because of who we are as a community, you may need to lay something down on the altar and sacrifice it.”<sup>2</sup>

If you explain it in that way, maybe people will see that it is a privilege. It’s a privilege to let go of it like this. You will be blessed in many ways as God gets bigger and bigger. Ruth did this. Ruth made sacrifices for others. Naomi’s God became her God. Naomi became her mother. She let go of her personal preferences and the things that made her comfortable, the things that she grew up with, in order to care for and be a spiritual friend to Naomi. And Jesus is calling us to change our hearts and minds so that God’s vision of the world can be fulfilled here on earth.

I was talking to a friend the other day who shared one of these great stories of this person who was living on the land when suddenly the water came up and flooded the entire area. And the neighbour came over and said, “Hey, let me help you.” And the person responded, “No no, that’s okay. God will help me.” And

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation*, (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2006), p. 156 Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Nichols, *Radical Welcome*, p. 124 Kindle Edition

then a little later, another neighbour came by in a boat because the water was rising, and said, "Hey, come on! Let me help you get out of here because you're going to be swamped soon." The man said, "Nope, I'm okay, God's going to save me." And then the water got so high that he ended up on the roof and the firefighters came trying to get him out with big ladders and everything else. And the person said, "No, God will help me." The man ended up drowning, not realizing that God was helping him through the neighbours. Through the people. Through the boat, through the firefighters. God's spirit works through each and every one of us in ways that we often don't notice and the ways we think are not possible.

Naomi probably thought she was doing the right thing by saying, "Go back to your home." But it meant that she would be on her own with nothing. Ruth chose, and God worked through Ruth, to be there for Naomi. I wonder how many times God has provided us with a friend to help us in our time of need. That maybe we didn't notice. That maybe we said, "No, it's okay." A community of faith is a place where the walls should be broken down. Where we meet people that we wouldn't typically think would hang out with us that would support us and love us for who we are.

I hope that some of you will be like Ruth. I hope that you will ignore people who are telling you to leave them alone. And in the best way possible – don't pester them – but just be there for them. Be present to them. I hope that others of you who are like Naomi...I hope that you take the chance to reach out. To be honest and to accept the help that God is providing you through another. Jesus tells us that we are to love one another and to love our neighbour. Anyone who is sitting next to you right now is a neighbour. How are we going to ensure that none of us feels lost and alone? That none of us feel like God has abandoned us because of the things we are suffering with? God's love goes beyond traditional boundaries. In the world today, our chosen family is becoming more commonplace than the traditional family, and like Ruth, we choose for ourselves who we will share our lives with.

There's a quote that I love that says, "Your truest friends are people who don't walk out of the door when life gets hard. They actually pour some coffee and pull up a chair." I hope and pray that when you walk into fellowship, you will grab a coffee, pull up a chair, and share your stories with one another. Knowing that God is working through each and every one of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.