

Love in Action

Ruth 1:1-22

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"In the days when the judges ruled...." Right away, this little book of Ruth begins with a whole lot of trouble. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a lot of trouble in the land of Israel. After Joshua died, another generation grew up after him, who did not know the Lord or the work that the Lord had done for Israel. (Judges 2:10) From chapter 2 of Judges onward, the phrase, "the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord", is repeated over and over again. And each time, the Lord raised up a judge who would deliver them; but the people did not listen to the judges, for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them. (2:17) The book of Judges ends with, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

Not only does the story of Ruth begin in the time when the judges ruled, but it also begins with a famine in the land of Bethlehem. There are people doing whatever is right in their own eyes, and there is no food in Bethlehem, Beth-lechem, which means the "house of bread". There is no bread in the town named "The House of Bread."

And as if that weren't enough trouble--people doing their own thing, no bread in the house of bread--we find out that "a certain man went to live in the country of Moab with his wife and his 2 sons." For the hearers of the story, the country Moab would have set off alarm bells. For those schooled in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible, Moab does not have good connotations. They would have been familiar with the teachings in Dt. 23:3-6: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you...You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live."

It must have been really bad in Bethlehem for an Israelite to travel to a land that is not admitted into the assembly of the Lord. Living among a people excluded from their fellowship must have been better than starving to death.

And that's just verse 1! Wow, there's a lot of trouble packed into one tiny little verse, at the beginning of a seemingly insignificant little book! By the end of verse 5, we have no living males, and 3 widows, women with no means to provide for themselves, no protection and no status. There's a lot of trouble packed into these first 5 verses.

But we understand these troublesome kinds of messages. Every day, we are bombarded with trouble packaged in tiny neat phrases: "Obama vows limits as US airstrikes in Iraq continue"(Washington Post); "Death returns to Gaza as cease-fire gives way to rockets,

airstrikes" (Al Jazeera); "Data show Elkhart Police beefed up Garfield Avenue presence after attack on officer" (Elkhart Truth); "Three churches leave Virginia Conference" (Mennonite World Review). Phrases that say more than they say; phrases that conjure up images we would rather not see and instill anxiety and fear in us that is hard to shake.

And surely Ruth must also have felt that same anxiety going to Bethlehem, knowing that she was from a people who were kept out of the assembly of the Lord; a people deemed "the other"; kept out, excluded. And yet, she had experienced such welcome from Naomi, such love, that to leave her behind, to do the expected thing and return to her father's house, did not do justice to that kind of welcome and love. No, she owed it to Naomi to go with her. Besides, Naomi was so sad, so angry, so deep in grief, that Ruth couldn't bear the thought of leaving her to travel alone.

Naomi could not have been easy to be with. People who are deep in grief, who are angry and bitter about the lot that life has dealt them, are difficult to be around. It is hard not to get dragged down oneself. And it almost seemed as if Ruth is invisible to her, for when she meets the women of the village, Naomi laments that while she went away full, God has brought her back empty; while her life before was complete, now she has nothing. What about Ruth, who has left her family and clung to Naomi, pledging in covenant language to always be with Naomi? Is she not something? And has Naomi forgotten that she left hungry? That there was no food in Bethlehem?

But Ruth stands faithfully by, ready to do what she needed to do, in order to make a life and a living for the 2 of them.

The book of Ruth uses a Hebrew word to describe Ruth's actions; that word is *hesed*. *Hesed* is one of those words that does not have an equivalent in English. Several words come close to the meaning of this word: kindness, faithfulness, loyalty, loving kindness. *Hesed* is a word to describe God, and it is a word that is used to describe Ruth. Because of Ruth's *hesed*, Naomi gets her life back. Because of Ruth's *hesed*, other characters are also inspired to live up to their obligations.

In choosing to stay with Naomi, Ruth, the foreigner, chooses to join her story to the story that has been told in Judges, the story of Israel. Rather than returning to her own people, the expected thing to do, she chooses instead, to enter into the covenant with Israel and Israel's God, out of love for her mother-in-law. Ruth fulfills the law by demonstrating *hesed* toward Naomi, and in doing so, she incarnates the *hesed* of God. (Kathryn Sifferdecker, workingpreacher.org, October 16, 2011)

This little book is a wonderful story of 2 strong, faithful women, trying to live their lives in the best way they can, in spite of overwhelming challenges and loss. The placement of this book in the Christian Bible, between Judges and 1 Samuel, makes it a pivotal book, the link between the time of the judges, and the time of the kings, the time of David. It is the link between Judges and David, for the book begins in the time of the judges, but then ends with the genealogy of David. (Podcast from narrative lectionary at

workingpreacher.org, October 9, 2011) It is this story that transitions the story of Israel from the time of the judges to the kings.

In this story, we see real people struggling with real situations, set against the backdrop of the big national story. We see deep faith, even on the part of Naomi, who is overcome by loss and bitterness. However, in the midst of this grief, she feels free to lament, to blame God for the state of her life. Only deep faith has the confidence to voice such accusations at God: the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me; the Lord has brought me back empty; the Lord has dealt harshly with me; the Lord has brought calamity upon me. (1:20-21) Even Jesus on the cross, directed his lament to God--My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Through each of these women, we see what it looks like to love God and neighbour: from Ruth's perspective, it is to stand by Naomi, no matter what; from Naomi's perspective, it is to be honest about her feelings, and to connect Ruth to the right resources--going out into the field to harvest, identifying Boaz as their relative. This book is about *hesed*, love in action; ordinary people living out love in the best way they know how.

In many ways, the faithfulness of Ruth mirrors the faithfulness of God. This little story in the middle of the big story of Israel, is a story about ordinary people, living their lives in ordinary ways, trying to do the best they can in the midst of political chaos. This is a story of how God uses ordinary people to reveal God's presence. In the actions and faithfulness of regular people like you and I, people who experience loss, pain and brokenness, who express that loss and pain in anger and bitterness, we see the faithful presence of God, embodied in a foreigner, "the other", Ruth.

All of us, at one time or another, play the role of Ruth in someone's life, usually without even knowing it. At one time or another, we each embody the presence and faithfulness of God for someone else. Most of us, though, probably see ourselves more in the person of Naomi, the one whom life hasn't always treated well, the one whose wounds are more visible than invisible. The challenge for us in those times is to be able to see the "Ruths" who walk beside us, those who embody the presence of God. This isn't always easy--life's challenges can be overwhelming and block out any sign of God's faithfulness and love. Sometimes it is only others who can point out God's presence in the form of another person--it is the women at the end of the book, who point out to Naomi, after the birth of Obed, Ruth and Boaz's son, that Ruth is worth more to her than seven sons.

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to go on a study tour to Israel/Palestine. We covered the usual ground in terms of visiting sites relevant to biblical stories, and the 3 faiths: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It was inspiring to walk in this land. We also explored the conflict between Israel and Palestine, obviously scratching only the surface of this complex and centuries-old conflict. I found myself feeling quite discouraged by the construction of the wall, the stories of Palestinians who no longer had access to their

land, and the presence of Israeli settlers living on Palestinian land. The situation seemed and seems hopeless.

One of our last stops was to visit Father Elias Chacour, who has dedicated his life to bringing together Palestinians and Jews, Muslims and Christians. He has built a school for all to study together, and had plans to build a university. Sitting in his living room, listening to him talk about his vision for reconciliation and unity was humbling and inspiring. Seeing the inroads he had already made was a sure sign of hope for me in the midst of my feelings of discouragement.

These stories of reconciliation continue in spite of current bombings in Gaza. An organization called The Alliance for Middle East Peace (ALLMEP) is working at bringing together Israelis and Palestinians, even now in the midst of the most recent conflict. Just this week, Palestinian and Israeli teenagers arrived at a Seeds of Peace camp in Maine. This is an annual summer camp that works at building bridges between these teenagers who otherwise would have nothing to do with the other. In addition to all the usual camp activities, like swimming, canoeing and other games, there are structured conversations for them to work through their pain and anger at what is happening. In befriending "the other", they learn that there is a human side to the conflict, that not all Palestinians are terrorists, not all Israelis want to take their land. They learn to talk through their differences and their emotions. This camp, like the schools of Elias Chacour, is planting seeds of peace for the long term. This camp and Father Elias Chacour are the headlines that don't make the front pages of our newspapers, and yet they are the stories that remind us of God's faithfulness. These are the stories and the people that embody God's *hesed* in our world today.

But these people don't just live on the other side of the world. They are present as well in our own community and neighbourhoods. As a congregation, we certainly experienced God's faithful presence embodied in the people who helped us clean up after the storm. At our conference level, I sit on the Ministry Credentialing Team, and I'm reminded to see God's faithful presence in all the people who give tirelessly to the work of the conference, especially now as we try to find our way through differing beliefs about same-sex marriage. These are hard, challenging conversations, and I need to trust the faithful presence of God embodied in each person, even if we don't see eye to eye.

While this book begins with trouble, the first chapter ends on a note of hope: "So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest." Bethlehem, The House of Bread, which at the beginning of the book had no bread, is now ripe for harvest. There is the promise of bread for these 2 widows. God's words of promise, in the mouth of Ruth the foreigner, will be lived out in the rest of this book, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, your God my God." God assures Naomi and us, "I will not leave you; I love you." May we have eyes to see God's faithfulness, embodied in those around us.