



Summer Preaching Series:
Characters of the Bible
Ruth & Naomi



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

July 8, 2018
The Third Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Characters of the Bible: Ruth & Naomi

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The Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
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Around eleven hundred years before Jesus was born, there was a terrible famine in the land of Israel. The situation was so dire for many people, that Naomi, her husband and their two sons fled their home in Bethlehem to live in the country of Moab, located on the other side of the Dead Sea. Not long after they arrived in Moab, however, a terrible thing happened, when Naomi's husband died, leaving Naomi and her two boys to fend for themselves.

Unless you have ever been in that situation, it's hard to imagine how difficult is – the loss, the shock, the disorientation. You're just wondering how to make it through the next day. Yet, Naomi and her sons did make it through. It took them a while, of course, but over time, they recovered. They managed to move on and make a life for themselves – Naomi's sons even married to two local girls. But then, about ten years later, tragedy struck a second time when both of the young men died, and suddenly, Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, were all alone, with no hope and no future.

In that day and age, there was no way three women could survive by themselves, because they had no way to support themselves, and so Naomi decided it was time to return to Bethlehem. She had heard things were better back home, and she wanted to see the people, the land, and all the old, familiar places, one more time before she died. Bethlehem was fifty miles away, though, fifty difficult and dangerous miles, a long way to travel by foot, especially with bandits waiting around every bend, but still, Naomi was determined.

Ruth and Orpah began the trip with her, although Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab. "Go back to your mother's house," she said. "And, the Lord grant that you may find security."

But, Ruth and Orpah didn't want to go back. They felt there was nothing for them back in Moab, and they wanted to stay with their mother-in-law, to keep the band all together. So, the three women went back and forth for a while, quarreling about what to do, each of them making their case and trying to convince the others to listen. Until finally, Orpah couldn't take it anymore, and she decided to follow Naomi's advice. Giving the other women one last hug that seemed to last a lifetime, Orpah turned back toward home, and before Ruth and Naomi knew what was happening, Orpah was gone. And, just like that, it was over.

Watching Orpah leave like that must have filled Naomi with conflicting emotions: relief and happiness, at knowing it was best for Orpah to return to her people, but also heartache and loneliness, because Orpah had become much more than a daughter-in-law. It was in that moment, amidst all of that emotion, that Ruth stepped forward, making it clear that she wasn't going anywhere. In some of the most beautiful words of Scripture, Ruth revealed the true nature of her character: "*Do not press me to leave you,*" she said, "*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 shall be my God.*"

Ruth's devotion to Naomi, in that moment when Naomi needed it most, revealed a sacramental grace. Ruth's words and commitment were an outward and visible sign of God's presence and love. Ruth understood that she and Naomi were inextricably linked, that they had a connection, a kinship, that ran deeper than marriage, or family, or blood. The two of them were bound together by time and circumstance, and nothing was going to break their common bond. Ruth and Naomi would face the future head on and together, no matter what the future might be, no matter what the future might hold. They were in this together.

As human beings and children of the same God, we all share a similar type of bond. We are inextricably linked and mutually dependent. Our individual “success” is contingent upon the success of others. We need one another and should care for one another, no matter our race, or our religion, or our nationality. The future is what we make of it, and as the world continues to get smaller and smaller, we will need to make that future together. As President John F. Kennedy once said: *“let us not be blind to our differences – but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And, if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.”*¹

It has been over fifty years since President Kennedy spoke those words, and yet, we still don't recognize or celebrate our inextricable connection with one another. Relationships across borders are in peril. Old alliances are frayed. In this country, we continue to be split by race, geographical region, and political affiliation, and it almost feels worse than ever. The bond that links us together seems to be broken. Cynicism and distrust have taken root. Insults, and blame, and finger-pointing rule the day.

But, rather than coming together, rather than showing up and standing up for another, to keep us all moving toward a better future, we seem to be sliding backwards, into old habits, and old behaviors, and old ways of thinking. Our lesser angels are ruling the day, and because of that, life seems confusing, disorienting, and heartbreaking right now. People are scared. People are scared, for themselves and for their children, and in many ways, the whole world feels just like Naomi did all those centuries ago – lost and adrift. And, that's sad, because it doesn't have to be that way.

In the ancient language of Hebrew, there is a word, “chesed,” which means “loving kindness.” Chesed appears throughout the Torah to communicate God's care for humanity, particularly the people of Israel, as well as to describe human kindness and care toward each other. The word is not used indiscriminately in Torah, referring to good deeds or random acts of compassion, but rather, it is utilized very specifically, and only when there is a clear association between two individuals. In other words, chesed is based upon some connection or relationship, where I see you and you see me. It's a deeply sacred, “we're in this together” sort of kindness, because, at some very basic level, we both understand that we're linked to one another, and bound to one another. Chesed is about grace, and compassion, and mutuality.

“Chesed” is at the heart of Ruth and Naomi's story. It echoes throughout the book, from the beginning to the end. In that pivotal moment when Naomi needed it most, Ruth's loving kindness bolstered Naomi and enabled her to keep going. Later, when the two women reached Bethlehem, they were the recipients of that same loving kindness from a man named Boaz.

Boaz was a well-to-do landowner in Bethlehem, and when he heard of Ruth's love and commitment toward Naomi, Boaz decided to take care of the two women, ensuring they had whatever they needed. Eventually, Ruth and Boaz were married, and together, they had a family, whose descendants included King David, and most importantly, Jesus, which is why Ruth and Naomi are so important – their love for each other led to a greater love for all of us.

The great poet, Maya Angelou, once said: I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

Sometime during this next week, you will come face-to-face with Naomi, someone who is down, someone who is hurt, someone in need of a little care and compassion. When you do, share that loving kindness. Help pick them up. Lift their spirits. Bolster them when they need it most. Let them know that you see them for who they are, that the two of you are connected, and you're both in this together. That is our call as followers of Jesus and descendants of Ruth and Naomi. The world needs chesed more than ever, and people won't forget how you make them feel.

Amen.

¹ John F. Kennedy. Washington, DC. June 10, 1963.