

October 13, 2013
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Bible Character file
(Series C)

Ruth 1:16 (from the OT lesson)

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God."

TRUTH ABOUT RUTH

Our world has many ways of expressing *loyalty*. We sing “be true to your school,” talk about it in terms of “frequent flyer miles,” show that we mean it by “taking a hit for the team,” or measure it by the number of repeat buyers for popular cars, trucks, and s.u.v.’s. Sometimes we define it categorically as patriotic allegiance, political devotion, or personal courage under fire. We associate it with financial support, team spirit, lifelong friendship, or even a well-trained golden retriever. The word *loyalty* carries a wide variety of applications, but ultimately only one meaning: *faithfulness*. The words of our text convey this meaning in a deeply personal way. After reading this beautiful passage and the short story that follows, you will know the --

TRUTH ABOUT RUTH.

Once upon a time during a period of national disunity, moral decline, and international uncertainty, there was a young and beautiful woman named Ruth. She wasn’t a Hebrew, she didn’t live in the promised land, and there were no stories about Moses and Abraham in her family circles. She lived in the foreign country of Moab to the east of Judah where the people worshipped the god Molech and practiced child sacrifice. Her name signified that she was a *rare beauty worth seeing*, a woman of equally beautiful character capable of *rare friendship worth sharing*. The truth is, Ruth was an exceptional person. And as we shall see from her wonderful story, her name has become synonymous with *faithfulness*.

Ruth lived eleven centuries before Christ during the time of the Judges when life was very difficult and uncertain. It was a time when everyone did what they thought was right in their own eyes (Judg. 21:25). Violence and bloodshed were common, injustice and oppression were everywhere, and selfishness and idolatry were the religious orders of the day. Things were pretty bad, and to make matters even worse there was a severe famine in the land of Judah. This curse on the agricultural economy forced men like Elimelech from the village of Bethlehem to go east in search of food and a better way of life. With his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Chilion and Mahlon, he moved his family to the country of Moab. This was supposed to solve their problems. Instead, it proved to be a huge mistake. Soon after their arrival, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi alone with full responsibility for raising their two sons. As they grew up, both ignored the Mosaic law, and took foreign wives – Chilion married Orpah, and his brother Mahlon married Ruth. Shortly after, both sons died, leaving their Moabite wives without children. This meant all three of the women left in the family were widows: *Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth*.

They were bound together by a common sense of grief and loss, but this didn’t help them change their poverty and helplessness in the world. Then one day Naomi decided to leave Moab for her homeland in Judah. She knew it would be best for her daughters-in-law to stay behind and remarry. Perhaps without her, they would find ways

to make it on their own. Orpah kissed her good-bye and left. Ruth, however, refused to leave her mother-in-law Naomi. She was determined to stay by her side and travel with her all the way to Bethlehem, if necessary. She knew it meant leaving her familiar home in Moab, changing her beliefs and customs, and accepting Naomi's faith in the God of Israel. She knew what she was doing when she pledged her *faithfulness*.

But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God."

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, they became gleaners in the harvest field of a wealthy landowner named Boaz. They didn't know it at the time, but this was the turning point in their lives. Usually the lifestyle of gleaners was meager at best, but not so for Naomi and Ruth. Boaz was an exceptional man. Not only did he take the extra time to visit his fields to see the people who worked there, he also expressed his concern for their welfare and did everything possible to help those less fortunate than himself. But when he saw beautiful Ruth and her mother-in-law, his life was never the same. He told his harvesters to leave extra grain in the field for the women to glean. His generosity as a farmer although well known, would soon be overcome by his romantic feelings for Ruth.

The short story about *faithfulness* was moved to a dramatic conclusion by love. According to the law, Naomi could reclaim the lost estate of her late husband with the intervention of a *kinsman-redeemer* (**Hebrew: *goel***). With land she and Ruth could re-establish a home in Judah. But when their rightful *kinsman-redeemer* decided not to redeem their lost property, this opened the door for someone else. That someone else was Boaz. Not only did he willingly buy back their property, he also pledged his *faithfulness* to Ruth and became her husband. God was pleased with their marriage. He blessed their new home with the gift of a healthy baby boy named Obed, which in Hebrew meant: "servant of the Lord." He grew up to have a son of his own, a boy named Jesse, who one day became the father of King David. This was truly a "rags to riches" story. But it becomes much more in the bigger picture that only God could see -- this little story is the link (that would otherwise be missing if it wasn't here) for the messianic line. And even more significant, the messianic family tree never would have grown beyond the time of the Judges without these Gentile roots. And that's the --

TRUTH ABOUT RUTH.

What does this story mean to us?

First of all, the *faithfulness* of God goes beyond human ideas about limits and land boundaries. The covenant promise of divine salvation by grace through faith was never intended to be restricted to only one people, it was designed for everyone! Israel was chosen to be a blessing to all nations! Ruth came from Moab, she was a descendant of Lot, Abraham's nephew; but God chose her to become the great grandmother of Israel's greatest King David. He also picked Boaz to be her husband in Bethlehem. His mother was Rahab, the harlot of Jericho who helped the spies of Israel safely escape the huge fortified Canaanite city. God chose these two unlikely people of foreign ancestry to preserve the messianic family line.

Second, God rewards *faithfulness*. The short story of Ruth is one of the best examples we have of this truth. Not only were Naomi and Ruth blessed for being loyal to

each other, they were blessed for being faithful to the covenant law that allowed Boaz to redeem their land and family ancestry. In the bigger picture, their blessing proved to be a blessing to millions of others.

Third, God will continue to bless us for our *faithfulness* to him. The Hebrew concept of *goel*, or *kinsman-redeemer*, introduced in the book of Ruth for the first time, was ultimately fulfilled by Christ. As our everlasting *goel* he bought us back with his own life, death, and resurrection. He willingly paid the price to redeem us, even though we were hopelessly lost and condemned in sin. Thanks to him, we have the blessing of eternal life and salvation! Thanks to him, we have the blessing of belonging to his Church through the means of grace -- the Word and Sacraments. Thanks to him we are now part of his messianic family, even though we are Gentiles! Our *redeemer* and only savior is Jesus Christ. And that fact of Holy Scripture dates back to the simple --

TRUTH ABOUT RUTH.

The bold Reformation hymn written by Paul Speratus in 1524, comes to mind:

*Salvation unto us has come
By God's free grace and favor;
Good works cannot avert our doom,
They help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,
Who did for all the world atone;
He is our one redeemer.*

(LW 355:1)

May God bless us to be a blessing to others.

In Jesus' Name,
A M E N

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