

Recap last week's main ideas:

Ruth is a **story of love and commitment** (Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are widowed, looking at a future without men. Naomi tells them to return to their homeland of Moab to have a better life. **Orpah eventually goes, Ruth stays – “wherever you go, I’ll go.”**

Remember that **Moabites are sort of the scum of the earth** – come from the incestuous seed of Lot and one of his daughters – as Moabites, **Ruth and Orpah married** into a Hebrew family from Bethlehem **when things were more relaxed** among the people, due to **not having a king** to rule with a firm hand – over many years, **these women had probably become quite close, but Naomi was realistic about how they might be treated** if they returned to Bethlehem.

That Ruth chooses to stay demonstrates a kind **of faith in her relationship with Naomi and with Naomi’s God that is a model for us...she didn’t question any of it...she just trusted that her life would be all right.**

On this really wonderful website called, **“SLATE” which is a blog or discussion group led by a young Jew named David Plotz** (who’s dedicating as long as it takes to read and analyze the Bible from his Jewish perspective), comes this thought about the first chapter of Ruth and it’s amazing ending: he says that Ruth’s speech at the end

*“...is incredible in many ways but perhaps most because of its insight into how people choose a religion. **Ruth does not come to the Lord because He is the Lord. She comes because she loves Naomi.** If Naomi worshipped Baal, Ruth probably would have become a Baalite. Sometimes the theologians forget that religion is not a calculation: Almost always, we come to God or Allah or the Buddah not because we have carefully analyzed the relevant laws, texts, and miracles but because someone we love and admire leads us to them. **Relationships, not theories, make religion grow.**”*

Wow...on this Stewardship Sunday, when we’re focused on the future of our church and helping our loaves to multiply...**this is a significant idea to reflect upon.**

So tuck that into the background for a few minutes while we hear about the rest of the book of Ruth...

Now that Naomi and Ruth have joined forces and **return to Bethlehem**, they hit the cold, hard facts of life – **they’re flat broke.**

Jewish custom of the time allowed for the poor in need to “glean” the fields after a harvest – extra grain was left by farmers purposely for this gift of charity, so that they may at least gather enough to help make bread or cereal.

So, Naomi sends Ruth to the fields to glean – and it just happens that **Ruth ends up in the fields belonging to Boaz (name means strong and powerful).**

Boaz is related to Naomi by marriage to her dead husband, **Elimelech**, but Ruth is unaware of this in the beginning...she just goes to a field to glean.

He greets the gleaners and notices Ruth – he asks his workers who she is. Because Bethlehem is a small town and family connections are tight, **Boaz has already heard the story of Ruth’s** dedication to his kinswoman Naomi – and so **he offers her full use of his fields and the protection of his servants** so no one can hurt her.

Then he invites her to **share some bread and wine** with him, and he **tells his workers to be sure she gets enough grain** when she gleans the fields. **They’ve made contact – the love story begins.**

Ruth goes home with a large pile of grain, and Naomi finds out that Boaz is the generous benefactor.

Shrewd old Naomi comes to the conclusion that, due to his relationship with her dead husband, **Boaz could be the one to take Ruth on as her husband and give her a home of her own**, so she sets about helping to make this happen in traditional Yiddish match-maker ways. (There is an old **Hebrew law known as “levirate marriage”** which obligates a **male relative or “kinsman-redeemer”** of a **deceased man to marry the widow**, in order to keep the family name and bloodline going, as well as to protect the **family property**).

Naomi knows that Boaz is spending the night in the threshing area (enclosed room out in the field with large, flat surface to beat the small grains from the stalks). She does a **makeover on Ruth** that includes **bathing, perfume and probably a silk scarf or two**, and sends her to find Boaz and make her offer.

Instructions: wait until he’s eaten and had a few drinks, and then uncover his feet and lay at them.

Imagine Boaz’s surprise when he wakes to find a young, dedicated and worthy woman at his feet! He must have already been attracted to her, because of their little date earlier on...and he’s older...so this had to feel like an amazing miracle to him that she was even interested. **He even thanks her for not choosing a younger man!**

Ruth makes her offer to be his wife, but **Boaz**, being a good Jew who **follows the rules**, realizes that **he needs to clear this with another man he knows of who really has first dibs on her** – probably someone closer in relationship with Naomi's husband than Boaz.

So Boaz goes to the **edge of town**, **gathers 10 town elders around as witnesses**, **finds the other kinsman-redeemer**, and **tells him the situation**.

Boaz, while true to the tradition, is also pretty shrewd. He doesn't tell the other man of his interest in Ruth – **he just talks about that there is an opportunity for him to redeem some property – oh, and by the way, there's a woman involved, if he's interested**.

Other guy isn't interested because he feels it will water down his own family's inheritance, so he rejects the offer and in fact, tells **Boaz he can have the whole package**.

Of course, **Boaz accepts** the deal (and because this is a **transfer of property**, **the other guy takes off his sandal to seal it...an old custom much like "shaking on it."** If you are agreeable to the arrangement, you **give the other guy your sandal**).

So **Boaz announces his intention to take Ruth as his wife before the town elders**, and everyone congratulates him.

I keep seeing a scene in Andy of Mayberry or some other television show from the early 60s when the whole town knows everything that's going on – at this point, **everyone in Bethlehem is cheering for joy because Boaz (who is much loved and respected in town) is finally getting a good woman in his life...even if she is a Moabite**.

Ruth seems to have created a place for herself in the land of the Jews.

They marry, have a son named Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who is the father of King David, who is the ancestor of Jesus Christ – **Jesus, lover of all people, is NOT a pure-bred Jew...he also has Moabite blood running through his veins. He had an amazing great-grandma who had abiding faith in God and love for others. How many of us have sat in the lap of such a grandma?**

So **Naomi is in pig-heaven** because not only is **Ruth safe** and secure, but by Hebrew law, **so is Naomi** as the mother-in-law...the **story closes with Naomi making baby-talk to young Obed** as a chorus of women shower her with happy words of hope, blessing and praise to God for this gift of redemption in her life.

And they all lived happily ever after.

By now, you realize **this is pretty rare in the Bible...much of what we read is meant to teach us lessons** or tell stories about the **troubles the Jews got themselves into in the Old Testament**, and about the **bumbling, exploring and struggles the disciples and early Christians got themselves into** in the New Testament.

There aren't too many books that just tell a really good story – and a love story, at that.

Why would this book make the cut when those long-ago scholars sorted through all these stories to choose the books we have in our Bible?

What implication does the Book of Ruth have for us today?

There are **several themes** we could consider:

Theme of **being honest with God and we don't get punished for it**: Naomi felt that God had turned on her – lost husband and sons, and had new responsibilities of daughters-in-law who were foreign and of questionable descent. She couldn't have any more children, she was broke and she was angry – though later, she acknowledged how God blessed her. **She never lost her faith – she just resented the bad that happened in her life and she said so.** I'd love to think that we believe in a God that expects us to be honest...

Theme of **trusting in God, no matter what.** Ruth didn't give it a thought that anything bad could happen when she chose to stay– she just knew that she needed to be with her mother-in-law and follow God's way. **Simple acceptance of her life** was rewarded with a rich and happy life after all the pain. Ruth didn't just talk the talk – she walked the walk, too. She seemed to recognize that **life has its ups and downs – and eventually, things will work out as they should. God's in control, and it will be all right.** I wonder if Orpah regretted her decision later on...

There's also a theme of **redemption and generosity.** Boaz modeled God-like love and concern for everyone – including his workers and Ruth. **He followed the rules and traditions of God's Way, he trusted the system of his core beliefs,** and his life benefited from it. Boaz was a giver who **shared with those who had less,** and he seemed to be thankful to God for all his blessings. He took Ruth in, even though she was a foreigner, and **the message here is that we all belong.** Boaz brought his own form of light to his world...in the end, **Ruth and Boaz provided a God-centered lineage for Jesus to claim.**

And there is a theme of **acceptance of those who aren't like us**: Naomi accepted Ruth and so did Boaz – **they didn't let her history or lineage color their ability to see her true self and to love what they saw. The tale of Ruth and its themes sets the stage for the coming of another foreigner who had absolute trust in God – Jesus himself.** Ruth, like Jesus, lived a faithful life for God – she did what God wanted her to do, and in the end, she had a huge impact on lives following hers.

If we took these themes and put them together into a message of what true stewardship means, we would find that they provide good lessons for us as a Christian community:

We should speak honestly with one another and with God about what we believe, what we feel, what we hope for.

We should accept our life as it evolves and never give up the belief that God is part of all things.

We should share what we have with those who have less and be on the lookout for ways to help others.

We should take in the foreigners and accept one another for our true selves, and recognize how we're all similar in some ways.

We should live as Ruth lived – as Jesus lived – finding God in those we love and loving God in those we find.

We should try to live as God wants us to live, because our lives show others what we believe to be true, and we want the world to know our God is the center of who we are...we aren't alone in our faith.

Because like Ruth told Naomi, God has told us, "Wherever you go, I will go."

Amen.