

Ruth: Hero of *Hesed*

Ruth 1:15-18

The Book of Ruth could be called the Book of *Hesed*, for that is what this book is from beginning to end, people living out the *hesed* of God, the steadfast love of God. It was the most beloved word for God in Hebrew scripture. The Hebrew people sang songs of the steadfast love of God the way Christians sing about grace.

In our Call To Worship we read from Psalm 118 with its refrain:

O give thanks to the Lord
for God is good;
God's steadfast love endures forever.

Their favorite verse was all about *hesed*:

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful
and gracious, slow to anger
and abounding in steadfast love
and faithfulness (Exodus 34:5)

Hesed is the never-giving up, no-matter-what love of God, the Love that will not let us go.

I

John Dominic Crossin, the brilliant Jesus scholar who was our Davis Lecturer a number of years ago said the three questions we all must answer, both as individuals and as a church are:

- 1) What is the character of your God?
- 2) What is the content of your theology? And
- 3) What is the shape of you mission?

Today we focus on the first, the character of our God. If you had to choose one word to describe the character of God, what would it be? The Hebrew people would choose this one: *hesed*.

Some of our ideas of God are our own human projections onto God. Anne Lamott quips: “If God hates all the same people you hate, there’s a good chance you have created God in your own image.” Some of us have a God with Multiple Personality Disorder. You never know which God is going to show up, the God of Anger or the God of Love, the God of Judgement or the God of Mercy the God of violence, or the God of Peace.

But the true character of God is seamless, a seamless whole. It can be described in one word: *hesed*, steadfast love. One word, not two or four or five, one, because God is One. The New Testament said the same: “God is Love”.

Sue and I played with some synonyms to get our minds going here are some: faithful tenderness, unwavering devotion, unconditional kindness. The name Ruth means kindness. And the word “ruthless” means the opposite, cruel, vicious, full of hate.

The Book of Ruth is the Book of *Hesed*, kindness as a story.

II

The story of Ruth is quite astonishing. Here a young foreign woman travels with her Hebrew mother-in-law to Bethlehem and reveals to the Hebrew people the heart of the heart of what their God is like. God is *hesed*, and Ruth sets *hesed* in motion.

She was not only a foreign woman, but a foreign woman from a despised people. The people of Moab. The word Moabite brought instant loathing to the Hebrew mind and heart. The prejudice was ethnic, religious and national.

Deuteronomy 23:3-6 puts it plainly:

No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live!

Centuries of hate and spite lay buried in those words. All the Hebrew people in Ruth’s time knew of the Moabites is what they’d been told—not the best way to know a person. It is the seed-bed of all prejudice and animosity.

The story begins with a series of tragedies. There was famine in Bethlehem. The town whose name means “House of Bread”, had little bread. A man named Elimelech left Bethlehem with his wife Naomi and their two sons to Moab in order to give them a chance to survive and find a better life—as immigrants then and now. Running from death, however, Elimelech ran into death. First, he died, leaving Naomi a widow with two sons. Then both sons, who had taken Moabite wives, died leaving Orpah and Ruth young childless widows. It feels to this point a bit like the story of Job, doesn’t it?

III

Naomi decided in desperation to return to Bethlehem. The drought now was over and Bethlehem was home. She gathered her two daughters-in-law and began the journey home. But along the way she changed her mind about bringing Orpah and Ruth along. They would have a better chance at a good life in Moab. They were young enough to remarry. “It will be better for you there”, she said, trying to persuade them to go back. Orpah turned back, but Ruth, embodying *hesed* for her mother-in-law decided to go on. Here were her immortal words:

Entreat me not to leave you, or turn back from following you. For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people will be my people, your God my God (Ruth 1:16).

We may not immediately recognize the extraordinary risk Ruth took, emigrating to a land which despised her people. Imagine a young African woman accompanying her new American mother-in-law to a small town in the deep South of America. She has tribal scars on her face, she wears African dress, she has the wrong skin color. Her courage is astounding. One scholar called her “a second Abraham.”

IV

When Naomi and Ruth get to Bethlehem the women gather around Naomi with gleeful surprise. “Is it really you, Naomi?” But Naomi turns to them and says: “Do not call me Naomi, for Naomi means “Sweet One.” Call me Mara, “Bitter One”, for God has made me bitter. I left here full and I return empty.”

She is overwhelmed in grief. Her God had become a punishing God. Sometimes it happens to us. We meet tragedy and our minds bring up images of a judgmental God punishing us. It is not the God we have been taught, but it comes flooding in anyway. Naomi was done with her God. All sweetness was behind her, no goodness to come—the very picture of depression.

V

Ruth, however, springs into action, and as she does, she sets *hesed* in motion. She went to the fields to glean what the workers left for the poor. It was

God's law to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger. Ruth's *hesed* for her mother-in-law sent her to the fields to gather grain. She came to the fields owned by Boaz. As she worked she caught the eye of Boaz, and he asked his workers about her. They said that she was Naomi's daughter-in-law, a Moabite. She's gathering grain for them both. Boaz, moved by this display of *hesed*—and perhaps by her beauty as well—instructed the reapers to leave extra grain for her.

Ruth's *hesed* and brought out Boaz' *hesed*. A contagion of kindness had begun. When Ruth returned to Naomi and told her all that had happened, Naomi's grief began to melt like ice floes in spring. She said to Ruth:

Blessed be he by Yahweh who has not forsaken his *hesed*.

VI

Then Naomi concocted a plan. Boaz, by law of Levirate marriage, was close enough kin to marry Ruth and have children with her. She said to Ruth: "Go down to the threshing floor tonight when Boaz is sleeping. Lie down at his feet. Let's see what happens!"

Ruth crept silently into the barn and nestled at his feet. During the night Boaz awoke. Startled, he cried out, "Who is there?" Ruth replied, I am Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law whom you have helped. Then she said, "Now spread your wings over me"—which in Hebrew means, "Marry me, Boaz!"

He was flabbergasted, amazed that she, a young beautiful woman would pick him, a little long in the tooth. This is what he said:

Blessed be you by Yahweh, my daughter,

you have made your later *hesed*

(meaning choosing *him*)

greater than your former *hesed*

(meaning her care for Naomi)

in not going after younger men.

In other words, for choosing an old goat like me! *Hesed* begets *hesed* begets *hesed*. That's how *hesed* works!

Soon they were married and soon after Ruth bore a son! The townswomen circled around Naomi and joined in the new grandmother's joy. Naomi's name was Sweetness again.

The Book of Ruth is the Book of *Hesed*, God's *hesed* beaming through Ruth, setting forth a contagion of kindness in Bethlehem.

And guess what? Ruth's son was named Obed who had a son named Jessed who had a son named David, King David. King David had foreign blood, Moabite blood, in his veins. And that's not all. David had a son who had a son who had a

son and so on until one day Jesus was born. Ruth was the foremother of both David and the Christ. God's *hesed* keeps on and on and on.

V

What about us? Can we be such a House of *Hesed* and start a contagion of kindness.

I see often your acts of kindness in this congregation. These little *heseds* make a difference. They fill us with love and gratitude. They can turn a dark day into a good day. They can help us believe in God again, as Naomi began to believe again, hope again.

A few years back people began talking about "Paying it forward", encouraging people to pay forward to others what they had received in life. A man pays the toll for a stranger in the car behind him at the toll booth. A woman picks up the grocery tab for the mother with children behind her in the check out line. We might say that our whole lives are a paying it forward of the *hesed* God has shown us.

So let's start a *hesed* contest. Not a public contest but an invisible one, with all winners and no losers. *Be like Ruth!* Set *hesed* in motion and see what happens.

The Dalai Lama, leader of Tibetan Buddhism, was asked about his religion. He replied, “My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness.” We could say our religion is the same thing: our religion is *hesed*, the steadfast love and loving kindness that goes on and on forever.

How about it? We don’t need a score-keeper. It’s our little secret contest of love.