

H. Stephen Shoemaker

August 27, 2017

## Ruth

Today I offer the story of Ruth, an ancestor of Christ, herself a Christ figure who set in motion a contagion of kindness, God's kindness. She, a Moabite woman, revealed the character of Yahweh called *Hesed*, a Hebrew word that means steadfast love, or kindness. Ann Ulanov, a professor of psychology and religion and a Jungian psycho-analyst writes of Ruth:

...she plants a new seed in Israel's history, one that reveals another side of Yahweh's love, a fierce yet tender feminine side that shelters the faithful, even the alien faithful.

## I

We must start with the word "Moabite", Ruth's identity by race, place and religion. She came from the East, a despised and dreaded region to the Jews, the land beyond the Dead Sea. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 states:

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

Centuries of hurt and spite lay buried in those words. All the Hebrews knew of the Moabites was what they had been told- which is how prejudice begins and persists and insinuates itself like a cancer into our soul. Like the racism of white supremacists, the KKK and new-Nazis, or the subtler racism that lies close to our hearts. Or like the prejudice of *liberals*: I love everyone but bigots!

Sometimes God comes to us in the form of the “other”, one who is different, and we learn how expansive love can be. Sometimes there is a land of Moab in our own souls, a disinherited part of ourselves that we need to love in order to be whole.

## II

The story begins in famine. Calamity often offers an opportunity for transformation. It is a stripping down, a stripping away. No one asks for this, but it can lead us to the recovery of the true self.

A man named Elimelech left Bethlehem- whose name means House of Bread- because it had become a House of No Bread. He travels with his wife Naomi and their two sons to –guess where- *Moab!*

But fleeing death, they run into death. First, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a widow with two sons in a foreign land. The sons take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, but within ten years both the *sons* die, leaving their wives not only widows but also childless. What will Naomi do?

## III

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, for she has heard the famine was over. She takes her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth with her, but then turns them to go back to Moab. “Your home is there, your future is there, not with me,” she said. After much persuading Orpah returns to her home, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi. Her words are etched in our minds:

Entreat me not to leave thee. Whither thou goest, I will go. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people. And your God my God. (1:16)

The words are often read at weddings, but they were first said by a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law. She has set *hesed*, steadfast love, in motion. She has begun a contagion of kindness.

What great love and courage were behind those words. She had no direct word from God, only an internal “knowing” of what to do. She declares her steadfast love for Naomi. She joins her faith to Naomi’s faith and launches into an unknown land whose scripture read:

No Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord... You shall not promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.

Phyllis Tribble writes: Not even Abraham’s leap of faith surpasses this decision of Ruth’s.

Picture a young Muslim woman, fully covered in Muslim dress suddenly transplanted in the U.S. in the months after 9/11- or even *now*. Or a Mexican woman working the fields, seeing the hateful signs “Go home Mexican.” I saw the familiar sign in a men’s restroom in a restaurant: “All employees must wash their hands.” And someone had crossed out “Employees” and written “Mexicans.” Or a gay man or woman cautiously making their way back into church whose dominant preaching has put homosexuality and abomination in the same breath. Ruth’s kindness and courage astound us.

Where Naomi and Ruth got to Bethlehem, the town was “abuzz” with excitement. The women gathered around “like a hive of bees.” “Naomi”, they squealed, “is it really you?!”

Naomi answered, “No, do not call me Naomi (whose name means Delight or Sweet One). Instead call me Mara, Bitter One, for Shaddai-God has made my life bitter. I went away full and have come back empty.”

It is interesting that she calls up the name El Shaddai, an ancient name which means God of the Mountains, normally translated “Almighty God.” Was this a primitive name associated with a God who

judges and punishes? If bad things happen it must be God's punishment. Sometimes when tragedy strikes we drag that God up from the shadows. God the punisher; we the punishee.

Let's observe Naomi's condition. Multiple losses and terrible griefs have cast her life into a season of bitterness, like sweet fruit turned bitter. We've heard of Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, depression, acceptance. Naomi is locked in anger and depression.

Ruth's presence however was a life-giving , saving thing. An African-American character in a movie said that God had saved him three times. First, when he as a boy lost both parents and his grandparents took him in and gave him a place to be, second, when as a young man the Army took him in and gave him a place to be, skills and a career. Third time, when his wife married him.

Ruth was God's salvation to Naomi. In what specific human ways has God saved you?

#### IV

Next page. Naomi may have slumped in despair's passivity, but Ruth springs into action. She went to "glean" in the fields for grain. A gracious provision in the ancient law of Israel commanded farmers to leave a portion of their crops ungathered in the fields so that the poor, the indigent and the foreigners in the land could come and gather enough to survive. Ruth went to the field of Boaz, a truly good man. He worked in the fields with his workers. He greeted them with the words, "The Lord be with you." And they answered "And also with you."

The eye of Boaz caught sight of Ruth in the fields, and he asked his workers her story. They told him how she had come with her mother-in-law Naomi from Moab, and how she was taking care of her, and how she had worked all day without rest. This kindness struck him deeply. He went to meet her. He invited her to keep gleaning in his field, and cautioned her to glean alongside the women, not the men, lest they treat her disrespectfully.

She asked why he was being so kind to her. He replied with the words that become central to the story:

I've heard of your *hesed*, (your kindness) to Naomi. Now for your good deeds, may Yahweh reward you under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.

Remember those words, "under whose wings."

Then Boaz invited Ruth for a meal together. When she returned to the fields, Boaz instructed his workers to treat her respectfully, and to leave some extra grain in her path. Her kindness to Naomi had sparked his kindness to her. There may have been some budding feelings of attraction too.

## V

When Ruth returned that evening to Naomi, her arms were absolutely full with grain. Naomi's eyes grew large. "Where did you get all this grain?" When Ruth said, "From the field of Boaz," Naomi's eyes grew even bigger. She offered these words of praise:

Blessed be he (Boaz) who belongs to Yahweh, who has not failed in his kindness (*hesed*) to the living and the dead.

Ruth has set *hesed* in motion and once set in motion it has become contagious: Ruth's *hesed* to Naomi in going with her to Bethlehem, Boaz seeing that *hesed* in Ruth and extending *hesed* to Ruth. Ruth comes home with an armful of grain from Boaz's field and revives Naomi's dead heart.

## VI

Next page, now Naomi has a *plan*. Hope is beginning to flow. This scene is carefully crafted, revealing and concealing all at the same time, letting us see only so much. It is both suggestive and shy.

Naomi said to Ruth:” Boaz will be sleeping out in the threshing floor tonight. Go, bathe, anoint yourself, dress and go to the threshing floor. After he has finished eating and drinking and goes to sleep, go lie at his feet, lift the cover and lie down. He will tell you what to do.”

So Ruth went and did exactly so. At midnight, Boaz awoke with a start and felt the woman at his feet. “Who are you?” he asked. The she echoed back a blessing he had given her. Earlier he had said, “May Yahweh spread his wings over you.” Now Ruth said:

“Spread *your* wings over me, for you are a kinsman who can redeem.”

In other words, “Ask me to marry you, and I’ll say yes.”

The phrase “redeeming kinsman” sounds strange, but as a kinsman Boaz could redeem her in two ways. He could, by the ancient law of levirate marriage, have children with her and keep the family line going. And two, he could marry her, care and provide for her and give a place of respect for both Ruth and Naomi.

“Blessed be the Lord!” Boaz said. “Your latest deed of kindness (*hesed*) is even greater than your first (her love and care for Naomi), because you have chosen this old goat over all the younger men around.” (My translation)

So Boaz agreed to marry her. He asked her to stay the night, so a midnight leaving would not expose her to gossip; and then, the next morning, sent her home with another armful of grain.

## VI

They marry and Ruth conceives and bears a son. The last scene is all Naomi. We see how she has been redeemed. She dandles her grandson in her lap. The women of the town circle around and say:

Blessed be Yahweh who has not withheld a redeemer from you

This child has “restored your life,” they say, the same words as from Psalm 23, “He restoreth your soul.” Grand-children can do this! “And he will care for you in your old age”, they add.

And as for Ruth? The women say “She means more to you than even seven sons!” Quite a statement for that patriarchal culture. “A son is born to Naomi!” they say. Not just to Ruth, but to Naomi as well.

And the son’s name, we are told, is Obed, who will have a son named Jesse, who will have a son named David. King David! David has foreign blood in his veins. Moabite blood.

And Matthew’s gospel will trace Jesus’ family tree and there Ruth is, an ancestor of Christ, without whom neither David, nor Jesus would have been born.

## VII

O, the mystery of God’s grace, how God works with the commonplace and makes it uncommon. How God took a bereft widow named Ruth and made her the foremother of Christ, how God took a hole-in-the-wall village named Bethlehem and made it a place of grace, and how God took that same village 1,000 years later and made it the center of the universe as a star stood in homage to a child nestled there in the straw, a child who would become the Redeemer of us all.

Isn’t it remarkable how the grace of God is evident in everyday acts of kindness, through everyday relationships, how kindness can become a contagion which redeems the everyday?

If you look up the word “ruth” in the dictionary, it was used in the middle ages to *mean* compassion or kindness, which is how we get the word *ruthless*- without kindness and compassion.

I am sure of this: God wants our lives full of ruth, of compassion and kindness, full of God's *hesed*. And he wants our communities and our nation to be full of ruth too, the *hesed* of God making its way into the world through us!

In a recent movie version the Cinderella, Cinderella's mother says before she dies, "have courage and be kind." Brave and kind. Those words define Ruth. May they define us.