

The Faithful Foreigner

Ruth 1:15-18

One of the first things a lot of us remember being taught, that we teach our kids and we even can still say memory now—maybe even more than we can repeat Bible verses—are nursery rhymes.

And most of these rhymes, if we are unaware of the story and context behind them, sound pretty fun and nice and light-hearted. But when we become aware of what they are really about, they're actually pretty dark and even disturbing. There is a lot more than than we first realized.

For example, a lot us of know the rhyme “Three Blind Mice” as a story about some rodents who cannot see as they wander into a farmer’s kitchen and end up losing their tails. In actuality it’s a song about 3 Protestant Bishops were burned at the stake by Catholic Queen for refusing to recant their beliefs. They lost a heckuva lot more than their tails!

The nursery rhyme London Bridge Is Falling Down is supposedly a story about an ancient superstition of burying a recently deceased person inside a bridge as it was being constructed so their spirit could watch over it and make sure it didn’t fall.

Rock a Bye Baby really isn’t about the highly questionable practice of placing a sleeping infant up high in a tree on a windy day so the breeze can rock them to sleep. Instead it’s a story about how King James II smuggled a newborn baby boy into his wife’s birthing room when she giving birth so he could ensure a Catholic heir to the throne. The wind that knocks the cradle down is Protestant religious revival blowing from the Netherlands that topples the monarchy.

Who knew such simple stories could be about so much more than we realize.

The story of Ruth is a little bit like this. Chances are if we have ever heard the story of Ruth taught upon, we heard it taught as a tale about a poor woman who was faithful to her mother-in-law and she wound up finding love from a good and kind man. If the Holy Spirit wrote scripts for the Hallmark Channel, they might look a lot like Ruth—some might be tempted to believe.

But there is a lot more to Ruth. Ruth is a deceptively radical book that tells the story of the Gospel and Jesus’ redemption for everyone. Ruth challenges the cultural narrative of her day and even our day, that God only uses some people, the right people and that redemption and hope are for a privileged few. Ruth shows us the astonishing universality of the Gospel, the totality of Jesus’ Lordship and the truth that for God so loved the world, the whole world, that He gave His only Son for everyone.

Who was Ruth?

Ruth was a woman from the tiny nation of Moab. Moab used to lay to the east of Israel just across the Jordan River. **(insert Map)** It was only about 40 miles wide and 50 miles in length. They were close relatives of Israel, having descended from a man named Moab, who was close relative of Israel’s patriarch, a man named Abraham. They were rivals because there is no rival like a relative. They lived in the same region, fought over the same cities, land and resources. And they constantly tempted Israel to worship foreign gods. Whenever Israel’s Kings married Moabite women, it was a prelude to disaster. One of the ways that you know God’s people ran off the rails is when they spent a lot of time with the Moabites. **Numbers 25:1-3** is just one example.

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So...the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.

Israel had a thing with the Moabites and it wasn't a good thing. They were a different people, a different race and Israel's prophets and teachers taught, to follow God, His people need to stay away from the Moabites.

Our first clue that Ruth is a radical book that points toward a greater grace and a bigger plan than we can imagine, comes from the fact that Ruth is included in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. When the New Testament lists of all Jesus' ancestors, some of them quite famous and renowned, among all those names is Ruth—the woman from Israel's frenemy, Moab.

But how does a woman from Moab get caught up with some Israelites?

Ruth married into a family of Israelites. They left their home in Bethlehem to, where Ruth's great-great grandson Jesus would be born about 1000 years later, to sojourn in Moab because of a famine. There was a husband whose name Elimelech, his wife Naomi and they had two sons Mahlon and Chilion. It's an old story, people leaving their homeland, seeking a better life. Oklahoma is a place like that. Historically people have come to Oklahoma from somewhere else seeking a better life. John Dwyer in *The Oklahomans* wrote:

Before the Trail of Tears, before the War Between the States, before the land runs and statehood and Dust Bowl, before world wars and oil booms and busts and the OKC Bombing and Moore tornado, there were others who came to present day Oklahoma. It seems the Sooner State has always been the land of the second—or third or last—chance for people from other places.

Elimelech and Naomi and their sons came to Moab seeking another chance—so maybe as people from Oklahoma we can relate to them a little bit. Sometimes, of course, looking for a second chance, a fresh start, works out. And sometimes it does not.

It didn't work out at all for them.

Not long after they arrived. Elimelech died-leaving Naomi with her two sons. Both sons married Moabite women, one named Orpah (not Oprah to be confused with the talk show host) and Ruth. After about ten years of marriage, the two sons died. They had no children. And so the three widows, who lived in very patriarchal and superstitious world, were left with no husbands, no children, no family and very few prospects for the future. It would truly have been desperate situation. The family would have seemed cursed to have endured such tragedy. Their desperate circumstances would have made them susceptible to terrible deeds and oppression for those who wanted to exploit them in every kind of way you can imagine. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth, in the ways of that time and place in history, would have been disposable people, sub-human, among the most vulnerable people on earth.

Naomi, Orpah and Ruth found work in the fields of Moab—likely just enough to sustain them—and there Naomi heard that the famine in Bethlehem was over. Naomi immediately decided to return to her family in Bethlehem. There she had at least some family to support and protect her. And Naomi released her two daughters-in-law from her family and sent them back to theirs, where they could get their own second chance at a new life because Naomi believed she had absolutely no hope or prospects to offer them.

Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.

Ruth 1:11-13

More than 3,000 years later you can still hear Naomi’s bitter pain. Her raw words still resonate. She lost everything and had nothing to give Orpah and Ruth-- certainly no sons. She told her daughters-in-law to leave her and begin a new life, unburdened by her. Orpah made the very rational choice to return to her family

But Ruth didn’t act rationally. She acted radically. Ruth did not leave Naomi. The Bible say Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and would not let go. 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 shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.

Ruth 1:16-17

So Naomi and Ruth journeyed together from Moab to a small and insignificant city in Israel called Bethlehem, Naomi’s ancestral homeland where the King of the Cosmos was born in water and blood 1000 years later—where they together sought a second chance.

Ruth the foreigner from Moab, Ruth the widow, Ruth the poor and destitute shows us the kind of love Jesus has.

There is an Old Testament word, a Hebrew word for love. It is a word used often throughout the Old Testament and it is used to describe the Lord’s relationship with His people. It is the word “Hesed.”

The Dictionary of Biblical Languages defines **hesed** as:

loyal love, unfailing kindness, devotion, i.e., a love or affection that is steadfast based on a prior relationship favor...

Redemption finds its beginning in *hesed*.

Hesed is love that unfailingly, absolutely honors a promise. *Hesed* is active love, not an emotion, tangible deeds of kindness and affection regardless of situation or circumstance, even regardless of the response, how we are treated or the consequences to us. Naomi had nothing to offer Ruth, yet Ruth stayed with her because of *hesed*.

I heard a description of *hesed* in marriage before I was married. I asked a friend who had been married a few years to tell me the big difference between marriage and dating. In dating he said you can choose your response. If someone betrays you or hurts you or simply becomes

boring, you can decide to continue to be in that relationship or not. You can choose if you are going to get deeper in or if you are going to get out.

When you are married, he said, you lose that choice. Because you have a covenant with one another and God, every response to being injured, being wronged, betrayed or even slighted must be toward reconciliation, keeping the covenant and maintaining the relationship—even at great personal cost.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it this way in a wedding sermon:

It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love.

That is *hesed*. But *hesed* is not just for marriage. God's covenant with humanity through our union with Jesus Christ sustains our *hesed* for the world.

Hesed is not love when you feel like it. *Hesed* says I love you as you are, even if I do not love what you do or who you claim to be. That is how Jesus loves us and that is how God's family is intended to love the world. And boy does this world need a lot of *hesed* right now and if the Church doesn't provide it, I honestly don't know who will.

God chose to demonstrate this astonishing love and show us how He loves us through the life of an widowed, destitute, immigrant.

First, **Jesus loves us as we are.**

Ruth told Naomi:

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.

Ruth 1:16

Ruth told Naomi that no matter where you go, no matter where you stay, I will be with you. Wherever you make your home, you will find me there right next you.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is different than every other religion, every other world philosophy in one way. The world teaches we must work our way to God. We must make ourselves worthy; prove ourselves. Think of the famous paradigm of the man who wants to get the answers to life so he goes on a long journey, walks up a mountain, climbs the last few steps to find the bearded, crinkly ancient holy man in a cave who can provide him with enlightenment. There is no way that holy man is coming to you. He has not left the sanctity of the mountain cave in decades. There is no way that holy man will meet you for buffalo wings at TGI Fridays or help you change a dirty diaper. The holy man cannot be bothered with trifles. He can't get his hands dirty. That is how the world views god—we must work our way to him.

The truth is exactly the opposite. Jesus worked His way to us. Jesus gets His hands dirty. Jesus meets us where we are. Where we go, God goes. Where we stay, God stays—no matter how unsavory, no matter how dingy or dirty, or suspect. We cannot run from Jesus. Jesus finds us.

**Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!**

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

Psalm 139:7-8

There is no place Jesus will not go to meet us. And He has already traveled so very far. A little like Ruth, Jesus was an immigrant in the cosmic sense. Jesus was an immigrant from heaven to earth. He chose to go very far from His home to be with us.

When I was in college, I went on a mission trip to Honduras. We spent a couple of days visiting a village that was way out in the rain forest. We went there to share the Gospel and dig latrines because they had no bathrooms—even outdoor bathrooms without plumbing. We were actually the first North Americans to ever go there. To get to the village we took a bus for several hours and when the bus could go no further, we rode in the back of a truck for 100 miles. The truck dropped us off at a path and we walked about 10 miles into the tall green trees, with some people even riding donkeys. And true to my form on mission trips, on the second day I got desperately ill from something I ate and I as I laid there feverish in a mud hut under a thatch roof, I realized that no one in my family had any idea where I was and if I started journeying home right then, it would be at least a three- day trip even using donkeys, trucks, busses, and planes. I never felt so far from home—but that was where God called me to be, at least for a few days, to do His work. Sometimes God calls us far from home. And it's a lot like what He did for us.

Jesus was far, far from His home too when He came to earth—and He did it because it difficult for our love to impact people from afar.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it like this:

God makes our situation His own...He is a neighbor to humanity. God shows Himself to be great and true God in that He can and will let His grace bear the cost, that He is capable and willing and ready for this condescension.

The God whose first bed was a cattle trough, who had no place to lay His head, whose cold body laid in a grave meets us where we are. We don't need to measure up. We don't need to work our way to Him. Where we go, He goes. Where we stay, He stays. He will never leave us or forsake us.

And that's the love Ruth showed to Naomi. Ruth chose to leave her old life behind and go wherever Naomi went in order to serve and care for her. She was with her to the end.

Second, **Jesus loves God and people.**

Ruth promised Naomi:

Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.

Ruth 1:16-17

Jesus spent a lot of the week before He was crucified in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem debating skeptics and critics. During those debates, a lawyer, a member of the Pharisee party who believed that we could earn God's love through works tested Jesus by asking Him, "What is the greatest commandment?"

And Jesus replied, drawing upon the Old Testament:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 22:37-40

You could simplify this to say, “Love God. Love your neighbor.” And that is what Ruth covenants to do for Naomi—Naomi’s people will be her people and her God will be her God. Ruth reversed the order here.

Why?

I have a theory.

That’s how Ruth met the Lord. She didn’t have some mountaintop experience with Him alone. He didn’t appear to her in a vision or by hearing a great sermon. She met Him in community, through people, her husband’s family who then demonstrated to her the Lord’s character by how they lived and how they treated her. She saw how her husband’s and Naomi’s family were good and kind and she wanted to be a part of a community like that. And at the center of the community was the Lord.

That’s why it’s never just Jesus and me. It always Jesus and we. That’s why Jesus called disciples and formed a community around Him and just didn’t go around teaching and healing on His own—which would have been easier. That’s why there is a Church and we don’t just get a membership card, a monthly newsletter and stay at home when we believe in Jesus to think good thoughts and live our best life now. Loving people without loving Jesus is impossible and loving Jesus without loving people is implausible.

In our context, we tend to have this belief that people meet Jesus through great preaching and teaching or powerful worship or reading a book and that does happen. I am the last one to disparage preaching and teaching, but that tends to happen more in a society that is friendly to and familiar with the Church—as ours used to be and is becoming less and less so. But in cultures that don’t know Jesus and have zero familiarity with the Word, like the nation of Moab, where Ruth was from—people meet the Lord first in community and then they grow through preaching and teaching and studying the Word. One of the great classics that teaches this truth is called *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*. It describes how Ireland went from a place so raw and barbaric that the Roman Empire put the entire nation behind Hadrian’s Wall because they wanted nothing to do with it, to the most Christian nation on the planet. The author Brad Keller put it like this:

The Celtic model for reaching people (1) You first establish community with people, or bring them into the fellowship of your community of faith. (2) Within fellowship, you engage in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship. (3) In time, as they discover that they now believe, you invite them to commit.

We tend to make people commit before they experience community at least for a people unfamiliar with Jesus—like the Celts, like the Moabites and maybe even like a lot of 21st Century America or even Edmond, Oklahoma where only about 1/3 of the people have what they consider a home Church.

And by the way, welcoming people into community, showing them Jesus through how we live, before they commit, isn't a new idea. Jesus Himself prayed about it the night before He was crucified:

I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

John 17:23

And next week we'll see how when we are one with Jesus and choose to love others, it creates new life not only for them but for us.