



From the Pulpit: June 11, 2023

Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Ruth 2

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, III: Friendship

This summer Bill, Katie, and I are preaching a series called *Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible* about the books: Ruth and Jonah. The last two weeks Bill has introduced you to Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. In the first chapter, these two female characters in a patriarchal society lose everything when their husbands die. Ruth eloquently pledges her loyalty to Naomi, even though it would have been customary for her to return to her own parents. Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner, an outsider, who returns to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem with her. Today we are exploring chapter two, in which Ruth tells Naomi she is going to go glean for food in the fields. By chance she ends up on Boaz's land. Seeing her follow along behind the reapers picking up barley off the ground, he asks his foremen who she is. They tell him she has been working without rest all day, so Boaz calls her over and says this:

“First through
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true friend,”

“Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.” Then Ruth fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” But Boaz answered her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!” (Ruth 2: 8–12)

Some of you may be wondering if a text which is more short story than history, possibly written around 450 BCE is relevant to us today. My answer is yes for two reasons. First through Ruth we see how an outsider can be a true friend, an agent of God's love and kindness. Second Ruth tells a story of how such unlikely people might be grafted onto Jesus' family tree.

Perhaps you heard the story of Gelje Sherpa, who rescued a Malaysian climber who was alone, shivering, and without oxygen in the death zone of

Everest. Gelje convinced his Chinese client to abandon their summit attempt, strapped the freezing man on his back with a sleeping mat, and carried him six hours down to Camp Three. Rescues in the death zone are nearly impossible. Gelje, who has been a part of 55 other rescues at lower altitudes and survived both the 2014 avalanche in the Khumbu Icefall and the 2015 earthquake, said this was the hardest rescue he has ever undertaken.

People attempt the summit knowing that it is every climber for themselves in the death zone. So why did Gelje help when others, even the man's own team, left him? He is a devout Buddhist who said “Saving one life is more important than praying at the monastery.”¹ I've heard it costs 50–200k to summit Everest. Naomi and Ruth, on the other hand, aren't trying to cross an epic adventure off their bucket list.

¹Gopal Sharma, “Nepali Sherpa Saves Malaysian Climber,” Reuters, June 2, 2023. Accessed online: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nepali-sherpa-saves-malaysian-climber-rare-everest-death-zone-rescue-2023-05-31/>

They are hungry and alone in Bethlehem, victims of circumstances beyond their control. Naomi is so empty she says “call me Mara” which means bitter (Ruth 1:20). Ruth had a choice to abandon Naomi and save herself. She chose to stay. And in so doing exemplifies the Hebrew word *hesed*, a concept that doesn’t have a clear English equivalent. It is steadfast love and undeserved kindness; it is action oriented.² Most importantly, *hesed* is a fundamental quality of God. Ruth demonstrates who God is and what we are to be like.

Scholars say that in the Torah, the “welfare of the foreigner is inseparable from the idea of loving the other as one’s very self.”³ The Bible contains multiple stories of foreigners who become examples of what it means to be faithful. You are likely most familiar with the Good Samaritan. In *The Gospel of Luke* a man asks Jesus what he needs to do to receive the gift of abundant and everlasting life. The man already knows the answer: Love God and love neighbor. Looking for a loophole or some clarity, he asks Jesus a second question, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus tells him the parable of the foreigner, the Samaritan, who stops to help a man robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. The priest and the Levite have already passed him by.

Who is the friend in *The Book of Ruth*? Bill may argue for Boaz in an upcoming sermon. But from the text in chapter two, I’m nominating Ruth. She goes out early in the morning to gather food from the ground for her and Naomi. A field is a dangerous place for a foreign woman alone. Through this backbreaking labor of love she gathers something like 30 lbs. of barley.⁴ To be fair

²Matthew Schlimm, *70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, 122–125.

³Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012, 60.

⁴Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Narrative Lectionary 138: Preaching Series on Ruth* at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/narrative-lectionary-138-preaching-series-on-ruth-5>

Boaz does show her kindness. He feeds her and promises she can drink from what his workers draw from the well. He tells her to stay in his fields where he orders the workers not to harass the young woman.

The needs of the immigrant and the poor are built into ancient biblical prescriptions for harvesting. Boaz follows these laws, allowing those in need to glean what is left after the harvesters’ first pass.⁵ For Ruth he goes beyond what is required. He loosens the ancient welfare work requirement by allowing her to glean among the standing sheaves. This is certainly generosity, but is it yet friendship? Maybe in chapters three and four Bill will make a different case. But today we have Ruth’s voice, asking Boaz directly why she a foreigner, has found not friendship, but favor. His answer is that he has heard how she cared for Naomi, how she came to a people she did not know before. In other words it is Ruth’s decision to care for Naomi, it is *hesed*, Ruth’s love in action that catches Boaz’s attention and inspires his acts of mercy.

Tom Hanks often called “America’s Dad” plays his grumpiest role yet in *A Man Called Otto*.⁶ Like Naomi, Otto is utterly bitter, and grief stricken. He’s lost everything, his wife, and his job. What purpose he finds comes from patrolling his little street for parking violations, keeping vigilant watch on the encroaching developers, and policing the recycling bin. It takes a friend to bring Otto out of the depths of despair and depression. His new immigrant neighbor Marisol refuses to pass by his door.

She is constantly delivering food, asking for tools, insisting he help her learn how to drive. When Otto tries to shut the door on her, Marisol sticks her foot in the threshold. She is first on a short list of unlikely friends for Otto. There’s also Malcolm the young trans man

⁵Carol Newsom, Sharon Ringe, Jacqueline Lapsley, *Women’s Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012, 59

⁶<https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/tom-hanks-grumpy-cranky-character-a-man-named-otto-remake-movie-book-210029109.html>

“hesed is a fundamental quality of God.”

who, after being cast out of his house, comes to find Otto, hoping to find the kindness he knew in his former teacher, Otto's late wife. There's the quirky, Richard Simmons-wanna-be aerobicizing his way down the sidewalk. The immigrant, the one cast out, and oddball draw Otto back into relationship, back from the precipice of grief. They even manage to get Otto to stop harassing the UPS driver.

According to a recent study, many of us are as lonely as Otto. Twenty five percent of Americans report having zero friends. Only 37% can name three friends with whom they can discuss important matters.⁷ Even surrounded by people we can feel alone. "In the 1950s sociologist David Riesman coined the term "the lonely crowd," ... to describe collectives of people who live according to common traditions and conforming values, but who barely know or like each other." There is an epidemic of loneliness in the world.

We need more Ruths.

We need friends who stick by us when we are at our worst. Yes it is true that Jesus is just such a constant and faithful friend, we know the hymn, "What a friend we have in Jesus." Yet it is our human friends, whom we can see and touch, who are often the most tangible evidence of God's unconditional love. Faithful friends come with a meal when we lose a loved one and a coffee when we are overwhelmed. Faithful friends hold our hands in waiting rooms. They will fetch our kids from school when we need to pull ourselves together.

They listen to us talk about the mess drinking, betrayals, and overwork make of our lives. They are there for the celebrations too: weddings, babies, and acceptance letters. Our besties get our quirky humor and will join us for a spontaneous adventure. The best part?

⁷Mike Frost, *The Lonely Crowd*, [ChurchLeaders.com](https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/379774-the-lonely-crowd-churches-dying-due-to-friendlessness.html?fbclid=IwAR2Sjz9Y3O4Pc61e-jJ64iKRG3hmu8zUAPO3Um1kz5LgENUXo0LHNky7IM&utm_source=pocket_reader), 2022. Accessed online: https://churchleaders.com/outreach-missions/outreach-missions-articles/379774-the-lonely-crowd-churches-dying-due-to-friendlessness.html?fbclid=IwAR2Sjz9Y3O4Pc61e-jJ64iKRG3hmu8zUAPO3Um1kz5LgENUXo0LHNky7IM&utm_source=pocket_reader

Friends show up even though they don't have to. They aren't related to us or legally bound in any way. Love in action holds these relationships together.

A true friend shows us what God's abiding love, faithfulness, loyalty is like. Boaz notices Ruth's friendship with Naomi and so does God. That's how a Moabite lands is on the list of Jesus' ancestors in Matthew's gospel. And this is great news for us, because it means

God's abiding love and faithfulness are for **all**, even the unexpected characters, and especially those excluded by human customs.

Ministers who come to Kenilworth Union quickly learn that nearly everyone who knew Dr. Bowen called him a true friend. In the coming days and

weeks we will continue to share stories about how he touched lives, captivated the attention of youth groups over Wednesday dinners, helped pick up the pieces of broken marriages, fed children's hearts and stomachs, took trips to places that opened our minds, and preached sermons that seemed to be written just for us. Today we grieve deeply for Dr. Bowen, a true friend. Like Ruth he modeled the faithful, the loving companionship of God for generations in this congregation.

Dr. Bowen trained at the Center for Religion and Psychotherapy, he knew how to combat the epidemic of loneliness that persists in our lives and communities. When one staff member went to him to apologize for not meeting a deadline because so many people had stopped by their office to talk, Dr. Bowen was clear that showing up and listening were always the most important priorities on the to-do list. As he grew, this church grew exponentially, he taught the members of this congregation to care for one another. I was only able to meet Dr. Bowen one time, but you all show me what he was like.

From you I know he was a true friend who taught us how to be friends with one another. You deliver meals and flowers, visit the memory care units, go through Stephen Ministry training, and show up week after week willing to engage in meaningful conversations.

*"We need friends
who stick by us
when we are at our
worst."*

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Thanks to Dr. Bowen friendship is part of the DNA of this church. So let us continue to welcome the newcomers, care for one another, serve those in need in the wider community, and ensure this church never becomes a “lonely crowd.”

Dr. Bowen preached and taught “Love in Action” the key to a meaningful life. So I will end with a few of his words:

“Love is a hand steadier than one’s own, squeezing harder than a heartbeat. . . Love is as near to each one of us as someone who needs us. And there is always someone who needs us. This is why we are here, for the love that does not insist on its own way in life, that not only hopes and believes, but that bears and endures the sufferings and the needs of those with whom we share life’s way.”⁸

Other Commentaries Consulted:

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 2012.

Alice Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *Wisdom Commentary: Ruth*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017.

Peter H.W. Lau, *The Book of Ruth*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2023.

Gail O’Day and David Petersen, *Theological Bible Commentary*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017.

⁸Alan P. Henry, “Preach On,” *Chicagoly Magazine*, Spring 2016.

Holy God, Breath of Life, send your Spirit upon us and awaken us, amaze us. Enliven our spirits and stir our prayers to new depths of trust and honesty and fervor.

You who are the wind who makes all winds blow; blow out untruths, and insecurities, and uncertainties, and injustices—so that we might breathe in newness of life.

Ours is a world of such clamor among cultures and countries, such complexity and nuance of politics and power, of poverty and pretense—yet your mercy breaks through. . . each human being your precious child.

God of compassion, you leave no one orphaned, in spite of the orphans we create through wars, abuse, disease, neglect. You leave no one orphaned; sustain all.

God of Grace, we ask you to repair the lack and loss in the Bowen family. Be close to his children, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren. God, we don’t so much complain that you’ve taken him from us, as grateful that you gave him to us, for a long, long time—91 years of life, 37 years of ministry right here in this place.

He baptized 1,991 of our babies.
He united our young lovers in matrimony 500 times.
He preached 1,600 sermons.
He guided us around the world,
Patched up our broken hearts,
And gave us wise counsel when we found ourselves lost in a dark wood alone.

Therefore, receive him into the arms of your mercy, in the blessed rest of everlasting peace, into the glorious company of the saints in light, and into glad reunion with his beloved Marlene. Now God, in your mercy, hear us as we pray together the ancient prayer

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