

Why Friendship Matters
Ruth 1 **Tim Dickau** **November 5th, 2017**

Mary and I were in Alberta last weekend speaking and meeting with a church on a similar path to Grandview. It was neat to see that Dave and Hannah and Adeya, who we sent to Calgary a few months ago, have connected there. They send their greetings. It is encouraging to see other churches, and other churches in our denomination, pursuing a similar holistic kingdom vision that we've been pursuing, one that holds together what is often torn apart.

My only regret in doing that retreat was missing the message that Joy and Michelle spoke of last Sunday about one of the most heartbreaking passages in the Bible last week. I was sorry to miss it because I am glad to be part of a church that talks about important issues like sexual harassment and rape culture. I got emails from some men who want to learn how to do better as men in subverting that culture and treating women with more dignity and respect. Encouraging too. I hope last week takes us a step further in that conversation and action.

This week we are shifting from the book of Judges to the book of Ruth. Any one feeling a sigh of relief that we've finished Judges? We did hear some rumblings of complaint. I think it is important that we read those gruesome stories together and read them thoughtfully. Otherwise they can have the effect of distancing us from scripture. I've seen that. Plus they can open our eyes to uncomfortable stories we may avoid around us. Now, if you were feeling a little weighed down by the heavy stories in Judges, let me assure you though that Ruth is a little tamer narrative. Another piece of good news: women fare much better in the book of Ruth. Ruth is one of two main heroes in the book and in the first chapter, she is the star of the show.

An Immigrant Story

When I was first reading this book again in preparation for this sermon, I was wondering how to connect this story of women from the countryside to our urban congregation. Then as I was reading it, I realized that this first chapter in particular is an immigrant story, one that many folks from our church and city know personally. It's an immigrant story with plenty of loss too. A family migrates to a foreign country and along the way loses their homeland, their culture, then spouses, sons and husbands. Unfortunately, these immigrant stories of loss are all too common in our transient world.

Within the overall story of the Bible, the book of Ruth, both in its placement in the Old Testament and in its content, serves as a bridge between Judges and the introduction of Israel's kings, specifically King David whom we meet in 1 Samuel. Like many of the stories in Judges, Ruth starts with things going wrong. Right off in the first verse we are told of the famine in Bethlehem. However, whereas Judges talks about things going wrong because God makes them go wrong as a corrective measure when Israel goes wrong, there is no suggestion here that the famine with which the book opens is an act of judgment. It's just one of those things, like the famines in the book of Genesis, famines that are part of a creation yet to be fully healed and completed. It's a modern story in that way.

This story also bears resemblance to the foundational stories in Genesis and Exodus. In this book, there is also a famine that leads one family, the family of Elimelek and Naomi with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to take that risky but bold move to embark for a foreign land. Presumably, most of their neighboring Israelites are doing no better so they can't help each other out much. Even more riskily, the family migrates to Moab amongst a people whom we know from the Judges story are not their closest friends; more like their enemies. It would be somewhat humiliating and even dangerous to move there.

Things don't go much better in Moab, either. The first thing we learn about their life in Moab is death. Elimelek dies, as do his two sons later after they had married. Does Elimelek die of a broken heart? Of a sense of failure at failing to provide for his family, or shame at having to abandon his farm in the promised land? We aren't told, partly because this is a story that focuses mostly on two women, Ruth and Naomi. Elimelek is in this story because he is married to Naomi.

And Naomi definitely does have her heart broken in this story. Not only does her husband and then later her sons die, she is left with two foreign born daughters in a foreign land with no security as a widow in a male dominated culture. Not a lot of options for a woman in that culture at this point. The path to survival seem precarious.

Naomi and Job: Two stories of Loss

Naomi's story mimics another famous character in the Hebrew Bible - Job. Like Job, Naomi loses her family, her husband, her sons and her home. She experiences huge losses and a precarious future. Like the gruesome stories in Judges opens our eyes to gruesome stories, this story of Naomi opens our eyes to the path of grieving, whether it's our neighbor's or our own.

In the midst of her grieving, Naomi hears that the famine is over in Israel. For the first time, the story mentions God. The narrator describes God as "paying attention to his people". God's response takes us back again to the divine response in the Exodus story. In that story, God hears the cries of his people too and responds. Here God's deliverance though is less flashy. The story parallels the way we often experience God in our world today where God's actions seem obscure at times, and we have to "pay attention" and look intently to see how these coincidences and human initiative mysteriously interweave with the action of God. God pays attention to the people, and we are called to pay careful attention in order to see God's action behind the scenes in this story.

With the famine ending, Naomi can finally go home. She really has no alternative. Yet the return home is something of a humiliating prospect. To return home after they abandoned the family farm is a disgrace. You can almost imagine the backward glances they will get when they get home, the gossip. "Hmph, didn't Naomi and Elimelek think they were more clever than us when they went to Moab to escape the famine? They don't look so clever now, do they!"

Naomi decides not to inflict this scenario on her daughter's in law, especially since they will have the added burden of being ostracised as Moabites. Plus, they really have no reason to go with her to a foreign country. They can return to their families and that's exactly what Naomi urges them to do. But they resist Naomi's direction. After some further discussion and haggling, Orpah decides that she will go back. In this story, there is not judgment of Orpah for going back to her family. It is the prudent thing to do.

Ruth's Remarkable Act of Commitment

Ruth, however, persists in her allegiance to Naomi. She will not leave Naomi. Which leads to the classic statement in verse 16, the passage most often quoted from this book. Ruth: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

Jewish interpreters of this book found in the Midrash centuries after it was written stress this exceptional commitment of Ruth as they key theme in the book. Which is interesting since the words and the idea of commitment are most often attributed to Yawheh. In the Bible,

Yahweh is regularly described as being committed, steadfastly faithful, to Israel. Here in this story, Ruth demonstrates this same steadfast and faithful commitment not only to Naomi but to Naomi's people and Naomi's God "till death us do part" except that she says even death will not part them. In that culture, when you die you are buried with other members of your family in the family tomb, so death is a joining with your ancestors, as the Old Testament sometimes puts it. Ruth is fully committed to Naomi.

Naomi's Lack of Appreciation for Ruth

We aren't told why Ruth makes this exceptional commitment, especially since Ruth both attempts to push her away and responds so nonchalantly after she expresses her commitment. Naomi certainly doesn't seem to appreciate the commitment Ruth is making. If this were a movie, at this point when Ruth makes this remarkable vow, we might expect Naomi to break down in tears and hug Ruth in a strong embrace with Elton John singing "Can you feel the love tonight" as a backdrop. Instead, Naomi's only response to Ruth's pledge of allegiance is to stop asking her to go home; It's more like "Ok, whatever". Instead of Elton John in the background, the Ruth Movie as it is told here might better go with Justin Bieber's "go ahead and love yourself". Naomi doesn't see much value in Ruth's exceptional commitment.

And her lack of appreciation for Ruth's allegiance doesn't end there: it carries over upon their return to Bethlehem as we'll see in a moment. When they arrive back in Naomi's home, the buzz begins just as Naomi feared. "hey, did you hear about Naomi? What is that girl thinking?"

Still disheartened by her losses, Naomi openly names her bitterness by telling the folks back home to change her name, to call her Mara, meaning "harsh" instead of Naomi, which is connected to the meaning of the word "lovely". Like Job, she also uses the name Shadday for God, instead of the covenantal name, Yahweh, which holds within it God's commitment to Israel. It's another subtle way Naomi like Job calls into question God's care for her. She complains that the Lord has afflicted her. Unlike Job, however, Naomi doesn't seem to be bringing these complaints *to* God; rather, she complains *about* God. It's a key and instructive difference for us as readers.

What I also want to notice is that Naomi says that she has returned to Bethlehem "empty", empty, without anything, which again doesn't say much for her regard for Ruth. Naomi doesn't see Ruth's faithful friendship as any sort of consolation or sign of hope.

When we finish chapter 1, Naomi is bitter and Ruth has persisted in this risky commitment to Naomi in a strange land. In the last verse of this chapter, we are also introduced to Boaz, Naomi's relative, who will be a key figure in the rising fortunes of Ruth and Naomi, but that story is for the next two weeks.

Grandview's Immigrant History

In reflecting about the first chapter of this book and its connection with our own stories, I kept coming back to the immigrant experience. I'm guessing that those of you who are first generation can find plenty of connection points there with Naomi. I think this immigrant story has much to teach both immigrants and those receiving immigrants.

On our anniversary Sunday at Grandview as I think about our history, having a mix of both 2nd, 3rd and 6th generation immigrants with new immigrants has shaped and enriched our community in significant ways.

Let me tell you a bit of my own story. I grew up in a community that was mostly German immigrants. I was part of the third or fourth generation of Krauts in Canada. I heard some of those immigrant stories when I was young, mostly when my parents wanted to remind me how

hard my grandparents worked to clear the land to convince me get up early or work late. Their tactics were usually successful too. For me though, it has been living in Vancouver and being a part of this church that has really introduced me much more deeply to immigrant stories. And I am grateful for all of you who are first generation newcomers who have shared your lives and stories here.

Let me share some of what I think of as our collective wisdom as a community in these relationships. Welcoming newly arrived folks to Canada has been an important way in which the church has sought to live into God's reconciling vision. Being intentional about welcoming 1st generation immigrants was a mark of this church before I arrived. Leaders like Pastor Kutch Imayhoshi or Emmitt Holmes and Yvonne Jones all were 1st or 2nd generation and they all made a special effort to welcome newcomer. I learned much from them.

In the book I wrote about our church's journey, I described this movement we made from towards a more integrated life together across our various cultural heritages and countries of birth. If you have come as a newcomer to Vancouver from another country or even just another city, you know what a gift those first signs of welcome are in a strange land. Especially from someone who is established in a city.

In both of her excellent books on the practice of hospitality, Christine Pohl speaks about how when those who are established in a culture invite newcomers or those on the margins into their table, they elevate and help to *establish* the place of the newcomer. In this way, hospitality can be a step towards the Biblical vision of justice, where all people have a seat at the table, a voice in decision-making and the opportunity to participate fully.

Are you contributing to that concrete road to a just society? Are you looking to welcome the newcomers to our country around you? Are you noticing and making room for those folks at your tables – at home, at your workplace or here as part of our church?

One thing I've noticed in our church is that newcomers who are welcomed, especially if they are in vulnerable place, become the most hospitable folks in our community to other newcomers. The gift of welcome keeps giving.

Let me say a word about one of the gifts newcomers bring to our community. One of the gifts is to offer those of us fully settled here to get some critical distance from our own culture, to see its gifts and its glitches better. Those of you who are new to Canada help those of us who've been here most of our lives to see some of the cracks in our culture that would be hard to otherwise see. Or to see the gifts that we take for granted.

This happened for me when I had a chance to sit down and have a conversation with SAdiq a couple of weeks ago. Welcome Sadiq. I encourage you to get to know him. Not only did Sadiq help me to understand the cultural complexities of his home country better but he inspired me with his patient and persistent work in defending the rights of people who are disabled. It also made me appreciate some of the gain we have made in Canada for physically challenged folks. He has worked for decades for incremental legal changes. He has risked his life for this work. His life is focused on the well-being of others, those most vulnerable in his society. Meeting with SAdiq was not only inspiring; it opened my eyes to the ways I can get so sidetracked by our entertainment, me-focused culture or get impatient in working for change. Some of you have had similar experiences in getting to know Benefsha, a colleague of Sadiq's in this important work, who was baptized a month ago. Sadiq's family and children remain in his home country. Pray for him and his refugee hearing.

Another of the great gifts of a shared life together between newcomers and established residents has been to overcome some of the suspicion or fear that is common in these relationships. Getting to know one another not only helps us understand each other and build trust, it declares to others that there is a way to live well together across cultural heritages.

One of the main roles of the book of Ruth within the Old Testament seems to be to nuance the bad reputation of the Moabites and challenge those who would demonize their traditional enemies. I mean the Moabites don't get much good press in the Old Testament to this point. For example, in Genesis 19 we find this auspicious beginning for Moab, the founder of this nation, a the son of incest. In the book of Numbers chapter 25 the Moabites are viewed as leading Israel astray. In Judges, the Moabites are named as one of the key oppressors of Israel, a group whom the Judge Ehud defeated. You get it. The Moabites get a failing grade as neighbors.

Yet the book of Ruth nuances and counters that assessment. The book was likely written during the time of return from exile when books like Nehemiah and Ezra were also written. In those books, the writers expressed concern that Israel not again be led astray or oppressed by their neighbors like the Moabites. Yet the story of Ruth won't let that concern be connected to ethnicity. The story won't let Israel rest with these fearful stereotype of their Moabite neighbors.

Indeed, Ruth the Moabite takes her place among the cornerstone figures of their history. Not only is she the progenitor of David, Israel's most renowned king, she is also named in Matthew's genealogy at the beginning of his gospel as a key figure in the lineage of Jesus. Surely the Moabite woman is to be regarded with dignity and respect. The Bible won't let us rest with these fearful stereotypes of one another.

The story of Jesus and the letters of Paul make clear that God's trajectory is to reconcile people across these cultural or ethnic distinctives. This is so clearly part of the vision of God that it makes you wonder why we have not taken it more seriously as the church in North America. Sometimes the Church seems to perpetuate the fear rather than overcome it.

Two specific practices have helped us in this regard. The first is what I mentioned a moment ago, being intentional about that welcome to newcomers to our country, both in our personal circles and in the policies we support. If we've learned anything it is that if we aren't intentional in this regard, we will lose this vision. On our anniversary Sunday, I want to encourage and challenge us to continue to be intentional about that aspect of our vision. It is part of the mission of God.

A second practice that we have benefited from as a church is this getting to know each other personally, individually. What that has meant is that we learn about the variety of influences that are part of each of our stories and remain less likely to stereotype each other.

One story that really impacted me and which I wrote about in my book came from Sophie Oboyu. Sophie grew up in Kenya, attended university in England, studied at Regent and served as a council member during part of our time with our church. Great person. Once during a council meeting, someone asked Sophie – well, what would be the East African perspective on that issue?" And Sophie, a little exasperated, replied "Why do you want me to give an East African perspective. There's no unified perspective. Plus, I've had so many cultural influences that have shaped me, I don't represent just that community. How about you ask my perspective?" That day, Sophie taught us to see each other as individuals, persons shaped by a multitude of cultural influences rather than as a cultural stereotype. I think that has been one of the gifts of having a thicker shared life across cultures, or in some cases, living together. We get to know each other as individuals and overcome not only the fear but some of the stereotypes that can

block our friendships. I want to challenge us to keep growing on that path. Ruth points us in that direction.

Friendship with Each other and with God

In the New Year, we are going to explore this theme of friendship more deeply, including friendship with God. I want to make two more brief comments about friendship from this story or Ruth that we will explore more deeply in the season of Epiphany.

First, Ruth serves as a model of offering committed friendship, even when Naomi isn't very appreciative or accepting. Her commitment stands in sharp contrast to a culture which sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has characterized as one of "liquid love". Liquid love. He names all sorts of reasons why friendships are so fragile: we move geographically to chase work, we spend much of our time in front of screens entertaining ourselves, urban life is taken up for many with commuting from one place to another. Then there is the reality that all of us are shaped by a consumer culture where we are shaped to look for the next big thing, including the next better friend, or that we are quick to move on when conflict comes or when we hurt each other, often from wounds in our own families or growing up. Add these all up and it's no surprise that the kind of committed friendship Ruth offers Naomi is pretty rare.

I also know that I often find myself like Naomi oblivious to the offer of friendship, especially if like Naomi I am focused on the friends or friendships I have lost. So I am like "whatever" to these beautiful offers of friendship. Do you slip into that response of whatever?

The story not only pricks us to see the gifts of friendship being offered to us, sometimes from unlikely folks; it also calls us to offer the kind of committed friendship Ruth offers Naomi.

Are you a Friend of God?

This is the very place where our friendship with God becomes so essential to our human friendships. The kind of commitment Ruth shows to Naomi is a reflection of the even deeper commitment of God to his people. That is one of the key messages of the book of Judges. Even when the Hebrews are an oppressive moral mess, God remains committed to the long story of blessing the world through them. If I were in God's shoes, I would have cut my losses and searched for a better, more reliable people. Yet God keeps his covenant even through these darkest periods. The story of Jesus solidifies this commitment for eternity.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that if God is indeed the one we meet in Israel's story and in the person of Jesus, nothing will ever separate us from God's love. No suffering, no losses however deep, not even death itself. This God can be trusted to be faithful to the end.

What I've seen is that people who are friends with God, confident in God's faithful love, are the same people who freely offer the kind of committed friendship to others. This friendship with God changes them. It can change you.

Our culture and North American church culture sometimes reduces our relationship with God to mere friendship, blocking out the other features of our relationship to God, such as that of relating to God as just judge, holy, mysterious beyond our understanding. But the answer to this reduction is not to forget about our friendship with God but to receive and nurture this gift within our larger relationship to God. Because it is our friendship with God that can fuel and resource us to commit to friendships with one another in the way that Ruth committed to Naomi.

Are you becoming a friend of God?

Jesus says these words in John's gospel: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you." Each week when we come to this table, we are not only included in Jesus' family, we are invited again into friendship with God and with each other