

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 24th Sunday After Pentecost, November 8, 2015

A Story of Two Widows

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November 8, 2015

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:1-17

The Book of Ruth is one of the shortest books in the Bible amounting to only a few pages. It is so short that our scripture reading this morning actually amounts to about one-quarter of the book. The book is the story of two women, Ruth, a Moabite, and Naomi, an Israelite.

Naomi and her husband Elimelek fled Israel with their two sons Mahlon and Kilion and moved to Moab because of famine in Israel. It was a violent time in the history of Israel and Elimelek chose to take his family away from that and away from the family seeking a better life in Moab.

The distance wasn't great, only about 30 miles, but the difference was huge. It was a departure from everything they knew and a move to a country with a totally different culture, one which worshiped the god Chemosh, not Jehovah.

While in Moab, Elimelek died. Subsequently the two sons Mahlon and Kilion, who had married two Moabite women, Orpha and Ruth, also died.

As an aside, Oprah Winfrey was named after Orpha but her name was recorded incorrectly on her birth certificate and she became Oprah, not Orpha as her parents intended.

In any event, with the deaths three widows were left alone in Moab, but by then the famine in Israel was over and Naomi decided to return to Israel. She kissed her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpha, releasing them from any obligation that they had to care for her and told them to stay in Moab where they had relatives and friends. Orpha did so but Ruth decided to stay with Naomi and go to Israel with her saying, *"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you are 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."*

Ruth may not have fully realized what her decision meant. She obviously had great love for Naomi but she was moving into the unknown, into a patriarchal society

where widows had few rights and where survival was quite difficult for a widow.

Naomi had Ruth to care for her but Ruth had no one. Lacking a husband in that culture, she had to scratch out a living to support herself and Naomi as best she could. To do so she resorted to gleaning, following reapers during the harvest and picking up any grain that was left behind.

She was working in a field owned by Boaz who was from the clan of Elimelek and hence was a relative of Naomi. Boaz saw Ruth, took a liking to her, and gave his men instructions to protect her and allow her to glean as much as she could.

When Ruth came home with so much barley, Naomi asked where she had been gleaning. Ruth told her that it was in Boaz's field and Naomi said, *"That man is our close relative; he is one of our guardian-redeemers."*

In the culture of the times, that was very significant. Widows had little and struggled to survive but things were potentially much brighter for them if they had a guardian-redeemer, a person who had the legal obligation to redeem a relative in serious difficulty. (Leviticus 25:25-55).

God had provided food for the two widows, at least for the moment, but they needed much more. Discovering that Boaz had shown favor on Ruth by allowing her to glean as much as she did and discovering that this happened in Boaz's field, Naomi, in the words of Alice Matthews¹, *"... cooks up a scheme that is bold, brash, and a little bit dangerous for Ruth."* Ruth needed a husband and Naomi needed a son to carry the family name. She saw that Boaz could be the solution for both women.

Our Daily Bread² said, *"Widows in biblical times often faced a life of poverty. That's the situation Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, were in. ... But God had a plan to provide security for them while involving Ruth as an integral part of a much bigger plan."*

Naomi's plan was somehow or other to have Boaz marry Ruth but God's plan was far greater than that.

Boaz admired Ruth and was surprised to wake up one night to find Ruth lying beside him on the threshing floor where he had decided to rest. Ruth looked at him and, as Naomi told her to do, said, *"Spread the corner of your garment over me since you are the guardian-redeemer of our family."* Ruth was not asking Boaz for protection. She was proposing marriage to Boaz, and he agreed.

But things weren't that simple. Boaz was not the nearest relative. There was another guardian-redeemer who under the law had first responsibility for Naomi and Ruth.

The law required the nearest male relative to marry a widow and to carry on the name of the deceased relative. The other guardian-redeemer was the closest living relative to Elimelek, Naomi's deceased husband.

A minion, ten adult male Jews, was assembled, and with them as witnesses Boaz addressed the closer kinsman about redeeming the property of Elimelek pointing out that he would have to marry Naomi. The other guardian-redeemer, "... *knew he would have to do that, but he assumed that Naomi was too old to have children and he would end up with the property with no heir to claim it. Financially the investment was a bargain without risk. How could he lose?*"²

But Boaz threw a rock into this thinking reminding the relative that Ruth came with the property and that if he bought the property, he bought Ruth as well. He "... *would be obliged to father a son by Ruth to perpetuate Elimelek's name over his inheritance. In other words, the kinsman would not be allowed to keep the property when the son was old enough to claim his inheritance.*"²

That was not something the kinsman bargained for, he waived his rights. Boaz as the next in line married Ruth.

Ruth gave birth to Obed who Naomi took as her son to carry on her deceased husband's name --- to give Elimelek a legal heir.

Complicated --- yes indeed. It wasn't exactly a typical romantic tale. But Ruth's choice in following Naomi's instructions was the first step in God's plan of redemption. "*From Ruth's marriage to Boaz came a son (Obed), the eventual grandfather of King David. Generations later Joseph was born to the family, and he became the 'legal father' of Mary's child – our Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus.*

*"Ruth trusted God and followed Naomi's instructions even though the ending was uncertain. We too count on God to provide for us when life is unsure."*²

Let us pray: "*Lord, give us humility and sensitivity to listen to advice from loved ones who know You well. Show us the right thing to do in our uncertain times and trust You for the results.*"²

Amen.

1. Alice Matthews, "Ruth & Hannah: Learning to Walk by Faith" in Overcoming: Portraits of Faith and Victory, Bill Crowder, et al, RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011
2. Our Daily Bread, November 6, 2012

Note: Scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011