

Rev. Zach Moffatt
Adams UMC
14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 15th, 2019

First Taste: Ruth the Moabite

Ruth 4:7-22

Focus: The Bible is clear...embrace is more powerful than exclusion.

Function: The function of this sermon to hear Ruth's story as a call to embrace which can lead to healing and redemption.

Will you pray with me and for me: Merciful God, move us to a life of welcome and love and empower us to leave behind our prejudices and ill-thoughts. Help us to see that all are your precious children. May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips be acceptable and pleasing in thy sight, oh God, our strength and our redeemer. Speak, Lord Jesus, for your servants are listening.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.

As many of you know we are in the beginnings of our new sermon series called, *First Taste!* And, throughout this series we are looking at those texts that are foundational to our faith. We are returning to those stories that we learned as kids in Sunday School or those stories that are so well known in our culture where even if we didn't grow up in the church we know them. We are looking at stories such as Adam and Eve, Jonah and the Whale, David and Goliath, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Burning Bush, and countless others. Often times we take these stories and we narrow them down to teaching one or two lessons about our faith—or a lesson on how to live life. Then, we assume that is what they are about and don't return to them to hear their wisdom and see just how much deeper they can really take us. So, during this series, we are returning to these classic stories of Scripture and following the Spirit's bidding to go deeper and see what truths they might have for us.

However, our story this morning, the story of Ruth doesn't seem to fit this category does it? Not many people remember studying the Book of Ruth in Sunday School and Ruth's story is not very well known in popular culture. Which begs us to ask the question, why tell this story? Not only why should we tell it as a part of this sermon series, but why tell it all? For those who do know of the story of Ruth, or who have heard of it, often we focus on the opening chapters where Ruth's most famous words are held. You know the words, even if you didn't know it came from this tiny, 4-chapter book. "Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Where you are buried, I will be buried. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." Often these words are read at weddings, which is beautiful. However, this story is painted as a picture of deep relationship and companionship. Which, don't misunderstand me, is important and a powerful lesson to hear. But, why tell this story? It's a small book. God is only directly mentioned twice. It doesn't contain much about the history of

Israel, at least on the surface. Why tell this story if it's just a lesson on friendship and companionship?

But, what if Ruth is much more than just a lesson on the value of friendship? What if Ruth's story is much bigger than that? For us to get there, we have to know what happens don't we?

The story starts off in the land of Moab. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, flee a drought in Israel. They bring their sons with them. There their sons grow up and they marry two Moabite women—which is something that is forbidden according to the Law of Moses. Nevertheless, they do. However, soon after, all the men die leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, alone. Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to go back to their family and she will go back to Israel. Women, especially widows were vulnerable in this time. This was back when the judges judged the land—there was no king, no monarchy, and chaos ruled. Orpah listens. But, Ruth—well Ruth says those famous words. “Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. You are a buried, I will be buried. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.”

Well Naomi and Ruth head back to Israel—Bethlehem in fact. That town should sound familiar. Anytime Bethlehem shows up in Scripture, something important is about to take place. Naomi knew life in Bethlehem would be hard. Moab and Israel were bitter enemies—it had always been that way. The hatred goes back all the way to the story of the Exodus. When the Hebrew people were fleeing Egypt, they stopped in the kingdom of Moab and asked the king for sanctuary. The king said no. He didn't know where they were from, what diseases they might have had, or how long they would stay. In fact, the king told the Hebrew people if they were not gone by the next day, he would have them killed. So, Moab and Israel hated each other. They despised each other so much, that the law forbids Moabites to be accepted into Israel. In Deuteronomy, the book of law, there are different laws which determines when people of different nationalities can become full members of the community. They counted it out by generations. For some nationalities its one, others two, while others are three or four. But, Israel and Moab were bitter enemies. Hatred ran deep. And, according to Deuteronomy, under no circumstances can a Moabite become a member of the community—not even after 10 generations.

Naomi knew life would be hard. Don't mishear me. Ruth could be welcomed into Israel, but never accepted. She could glean the left-over crops. She could live with Naomie. But, she could never have a place in society. She could never offer sacrifices with a Levite priest. She could never re-marry thus never having children. She would be a widow the rest of her life—making her the lowest in society. And, that is what they did. Ruth and Naomi gleaned from the land. They picked the left-over crops.

And, that is where Ruth met Boaz—one of Naomi's kinsman redeemers—the one, who according to law could redeem or remarry a widow in order that she might be supported and cared for. But, it would be against the law. The Bible is clear, the law is clear, Moabites cannot

be members of the community. However, Boaz showed Ruth kindness—one that she had never seen or known before. Boaz invited her to the threshing room. Ruth went, which was a dangerous thing to do—Ruth, a Moabite to meet Boaz, a man, at night—he could have done anything. But, Boaz was a righteous man. He sent Ruth away with plenty of food. He told her his plan. He would redeem Naomi's land, thus allowing Naomi to keep the land in her families name. And, he would redeem Ruth—thus making Ruth an official member of the community.

Ruth's story is much more than a story of friendship. It is a story of redemption. Of salvation. Of love. Of compassion. Of care for the stranger. It is a story that throughout it, we see the grander biblical mandate to welcome the stranger, care for the most vulnerable, and that love always trumps laws and decrees. In Ruth, we are reminded that God calls nations to be holy and what determines a nation holy isn't how well they know the Bible, how many churches they have, or if their leaders pray. What makes a nation holy, in God's eyes, is how well a nation cares for the most vulnerable among them—the widows, the orphans, the forgotten, the poor, the oppressed, the strangers, the lonely, the grieving, the broken, the addicted, the sick, the hurting. Ruth's story is a story of redemption that shows the power of embrace. Boaz was supposed to hate Ruth because she was a Moabite. He was legally required to exclude her and only redeem Naomi's land. But he went the step further and follow God's call to embrace all of God's children—even our supposed enemy.

But, I want to go a step further. **Ruth's story is not only a story of redemption of these two women at their lowest point—it is a story that also details the redemption of Israel.** Did you catch the genealogy at the end of our text this morning? Ruth and Boaz had a son, and his name was Obed. Obed married and had a son, Jesse. And, Jesse married, had multiple sons—one of whom, his youngest in fact, was a boy named David. Yes, the very same David who Samuel would anoint as king of Israel. The same David who would face a giant named Goliath. The same David who would take Israel to its glory and might that it is known for during his reign. The same David who would fall and slip up—but also knew the power of repentance and the power of embrace. The same David who God told that his house—his lineage—would be used to save the world. This David—is only three generations removed from a Moabite.

But, I want to go even further. **Ruth's story is not only a story of redemption of Ruth and Naomi, it is not just a story of the redemption of Israel, but it is also a story where we see God's plan to redeem and save humanity and the world.** The Gospel of Matthew, at the very beginning, tells us of a man named Joseph who is engaged with a young woman named Mary. She is pregnant. Joseph is visited by an angel and Mary is filled with the Holy Spirit, and although a virgin, will give birth to a son. His name will be Jesus and he will save the entire world from their sins. Luke tells us this couple is to return to Joseph's home town—Bethlehem—because Joseph is of the house and lineage of David. Oh, dear friends, it's not why should we tell the story of Ruth. Rather, the question we should be asking is, how can we not tell this story? Because in it—we see a microcosm of the entire history of the world's redemption—we see in this 4 chapter book the bigger story of scripture—love, compassion, mercy, welcome, and embrace.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, AND OF THE REDEEMER, AND OF THE SUSTAINER, AMEN.