

Nevertheless She Persisted: Ruth
November 17, 2024
Rev. Kelley Becker

As I mentioned at the beginning of worship, this series is asking us to use our imaginations to think about the stories of the women the author of Matthew listed in Jesus' family tree. We imagine that Mary, Jesus' mother, told her son these stories when he was a child. Based on my own experiences, I don't think that's too much of a stretch for our imaginations. My grandma told me stories of people in our family and I shared those stories with my children and grandchildren, along with the important stories of women like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, though they are not part of our family. Stories help us see the world from new perspectives.

Last week, Rev. Hubbard imagined a sleepy Jesus asking his mom to tell him the story of Rahab, his many times over great grandma. Today, let's imagine that young Jesus argued with his best friend, Caleb. Jesus stood up for Caleb to some other boys, but Caleb didn't seem very appreciative and Jesus began to remember times when he didn't feel like Caleb had stood up for him. It had taken a lot of courage to do what he had done and Caleb didn't even say thank you. At home, Jesus told his mom about it and said that he didn't want to be friends with Caleb anymore. So, his mom told him about Ruth...she cleaned it up a little bit for his young ears though.

"Your many times over great grandma Ruth," she began, "did not have an easy life. In fact, her adult life began with tragedy. Let me back up. There was a famine in Israel, so Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, left for Moab because they were told they could find food there." Jesus was shocked when his mom said that because Moab was not a place good Jews wanted to be. Jesus had heard other stories and had gotten the idea that the people in Moab were different and not in a good way. Mary continued to blow Jesus' mind when she told him that, while in Moab, Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite women. You see, Moabite women had a reputation for being seductresses and for bringing no good to Israelite men. Mary asked Jesus to think about it, "There they were in Moab, who else were they supposed to marry?" she asked.

"They married Orpah and Ruth, but neither couple had children. "That's sad," Jesus said. "It gets worse," Mary told him. "While in Moab, Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion died and the three women were left without a man to take care of them. They had no way of providing for themselves." "Even I know that isn't good," Jesus said.

"Naomi knew the best thing for her to do was to go home, back to Bethlehem. So, she released Orpah and Ruth, telling them both that she had no more sons to offer them, so they should go home, each to their mother's house. Orpah went, but Ruth refused, saying:

'Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people

and your God my God.
17 Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16-17)

"Wow," Jesus said, "That is some loyalty. She must have really loved Naomi." You're exactly right," Mary said. "Ruth would be a stranger in a strange land, without a man. It would be difficult for anyone to be more vulnerable than that," she reminded him. Now, having experienced being both a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law, I can appreciate Ruth's sacrifice. I will be honest, if something happened to John, once we had the funeral, I would probably never see his mother again and I would definitely not "cling to her," that's how the text describes what Ruth did. And I wouldn't expect the spouses of Andrew or Christopher to make me a priority if something happened to them. But Ruth did exactly that.

Those promises she made to Naomi sound very covenantal, almost like wedding vows, which is why couples sometimes choose these verses to be read at their wedding. Ruth was all in. Mary asked Jesus, "What do you think Naomi said to Ruth when she told her she would stay with her no matter what?" What do you think Naomi said to Ruth? I imagine Jesus would have suggested things like, thank you or I can't believe you would make such a sacrifice, or I will never leave you either. When Mary told Jesus that Naomi, in response to Ruth's great profession of love and loyalty, said nothing, Jesus likely would have begun to see where his mom was going with this story, but he was invested now.

Mary continued, "Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem." (which incidentally, means "house of bread," but Jesus would have known that) They arrived there just in time for the barley harvest and were greeted by the women of the town who remembered Naomi and called her by name. Naomi said to the women,
Call me no longer Naomi;

call me Mara,
for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"

"Naomi sounds a lot like Caleb," Jesus would have said. Mary must have laughed and said, "You think?"

We should not miss the irony the biblical storyteller included here. Naomi's family left Bethlehem, "the house of bread," because their stomachs were empty due to the

famine. They went to Moab, supposedly a land of plenty, a place of fullness, and it ended up being a place of sterility and death, emptiness. And Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, "the house of bread," again empty, with no men, no children, and no way to claim the family land because women couldn't own land. But they had each other, which, at this point, seems lost on Naomi.

The text doesn't say Ruth was hurt. In fact, the story continues with examples of Ruth's continued fierce loyalty. Having made her point about loyalty and friendships, we are going to assume Mary left Ruth's story right there when she told it to Jesus. This next part gets a little spicy.

To provide food for the two of them, Ruth went to the field to glean what was left after it was harvested. Torah law required farmers to leave grain in the fields for the ones who were vulnerable, specifically widows, orphans, and strangers. Taking care of one another was very much a part of Israelite culture. It turns out, Naomi had a distant relative on her husband's side. He was a wealthy landowner named Boaz. Coincidentally, Ruth found herself gleaning in his field and Boaz himself noticed her.

He treated Ruth with kindness when he was told that she was the Moabite woman who had come to Bethlehem with Naomi. He acknowledged the loyalty she had shown Naomi, "May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge," he said. For her safety, he told her to stay in his field, close to the women working for him. When Ruth returned to Naomi with food and told her whose field she had gleaned in, Naomi told her that Boaz was her relative. From that day forward, throughout the harvest, Ruth went to Boaz's field and gleaned and was safe there among the women. They had food to eat, but Ruth and Naomi were no closer to lasting security and stability than they had been when they arrived. For whatever reason, Boaz done nothing, other than what he was required by law to do, to provide Naomi and Ruth with the security they needed for the future, even though he was family. If Naomi knew Boaz was a close relative, the one with the power to redeem the family land and care for the family women, then Boaz knew it too. So, Naomi hatched a plan. She told Ruth to clean herself up, put on some perfume, and go visit Boaz on the threshing floor. She should wait until he was finished eating and drinking, basically until he was good and drunk, and then lie down beside him. Naomi told her to lie down next to him and uncover his feet, feet being an ancient Hebrew euphemism for "genitals." Basically, Naomi sent Ruth to seduce Boaz. The storyteller typecast Ruth for sure. Of course, a Moabite woman would be willing to do that, right?

This is Ruth 3:6-18.

So she went down to the threshing floor and did just as her mother-in-law had instructed her. ⁷ When Boaz had eaten and drunk and was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came stealthily and uncovered his feet and lay down. ⁸ At midnight the man was startled and turned over,

and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! 9 He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." In other words, "Take care of me and Naomi...we are family."

10 He said, "May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. 11 And now, my daughter, do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman. 12 But now, though it is true that I am a near kinsman, there is another kinsman more closely related than I. 13 Remain this night, and in the morning, if he will act as next-of-kin for you, good; let him do it. But if he is not willing to act as next-of-kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you. Lie down until the morning."

14 So she lay at his feet until morning but got up before one person could recognize another, for he said, "It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor." 15 Then he said, "Bring the cloak you are wearing and hold it out." So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley and put it on her back; then he went into the town. 16 She came to her mother-in-law, who said, "How did things go with you, my daughter?" Then she told her all that the man had done for her, 17 saying, "He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said, 'Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.' " 18 She replied, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today."

Ruth returned to Naomi, not with empty hands, but full. Boaz did work it out. He offered the family land to the closer kinsman, but while he was interested in the land, he wasn't so interested in the women who came with it. So Boaz became the kinsman redeemer. This is how Ruth's story ends:

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Naomi, at last, was full. Because of Ruth's love and loyalty, the women were full, and they were saved. But let's note that they did not just sit around and wait to be saved, they made it happen. Mostly Ruth made it happen. She gave up everything, she did everything that was required of her, she kept her promises to Naomi, and more. In Hebrew, the kind of love Ruth had for Naomi is called *hesed*. *Hesed* is the word biblical writers use to describe God's steadfast love for human beings. Mary must have explained that to Jesus. She must have said that the people of God are called to

fiercely love one another as God fiercely loves all of us. The story of Ruth is a story of God's love with "skin on." It is a story of love we can see.

This is a very good reason for the author of Matthew to include Ruth in Jesus' family tree. Just as Tamar's story taught young Jesus what God's righteousness looks like and Rahab's story taught him what God's mercy looks like, Ruth's story taught him what God's steadfast love looks like. And just as we can see over-the-top righteousness and mercy in what Jesus taught and how he lived, we can see over-the-top unconditional love, perhaps we can see that most clearly of all.

In Matthew 4:18-22 we read the story of Jesus calling his disciples in which he seems to use great grandma Ruth's story as a template for discipleship. He told his future disciples to drop everything they were doing to follow him. And they did. Just as Ruth left everything she knew, everything that was comfortable, and went all in with commitment, loyalty, and love of Naomi, Jesus asked his disciples to go all in as well.

Once called, his disciples witnessed situation after situation in which Jesus demonstrated hesed. In Matthew alone, he healed lepers and people who were demon-possessed, people who were in chronic pain, and afflicted with all kinds of diseases, you know the people that ancient culture kept at arm's length because they assumed they had done something awful to earn those conditions. He listened to people who were different from him, and he met them at the table for meals. Again and again, we read about a Jesus who put love above everything else. Why? Because that is what he was taught and that is what God does.

That love is still alive in this world and we are living in a moment when love looks more beautiful than ever. In the same way that stars look brighter amid a dark, dark sky, love is more beautiful in a world that seems overrun by fear. I wonder if that is how it seemed to the people Jesus met along his way. The first-century Roman Empire was fabulous for the Empire and its operatives, but it was oppressive, violent, and just plain scary to the people who chose to follow Jesus. His words and his actions motivated by love must have seemed like a bright light in a very dark world.

Right now, in these days following elections that have disappointed and infuriated so many of us, we are each left to figure out what to do next. I have tried not to disrespect my own grief, and the grief of so many others, by moving too fast to, "Everything is fine." What I do know is that our present situation gives us the opportunity to notice how beautiful steadfast love really is and to share it. If we buy into Ruth's story, that means steadfast love looks like continuing to reach out to people even when they don't reach back. It looks like continuing to walk with people, even when we don't feel appreciated. It looks like believing that it is love that will ultimately save the world.

Admittedly, there is a lot in the world not to love and we should keep using our voices and our resources to protect the ones who are vulnerable and to create a world that is different. But we also need to make the beauty of love known and seen. We should notice when someone says something kind and tell them we noticed. Notice when someone uses their voice to help someone else and thank them. The world will be different, or at least our corner of the world will be different if we promote love and not fear and hate. Instead of steadfastly pointing out what's wrong in the world, perhaps we can steadfastly tell the stories of the ones working to change it.

I will start. I could tell you story after story of all the ways immigrants and refugees suffer in our nation and in our world. You know I could because I have. But instead, I am going to tell you about Ron Davis Alvarez. Alvarez grew up in Venezuela and at 10 years old he joined El Sistema, a program that provides free classical music training to children from under-resourced communities. "I fell in love with music from my first class," he said.

When he grew up, Alvarez worked for El Sistema to share the love of music with people all over the world. It was this work that led him to first visit Sweden in 2015 when unprecedented numbers of refugees were arriving in the country, most from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. He was struck by their plight and wanted to help. He moved to Sweden the following year and created a music group for refugees. He named the group the Dream Orchestra. Now, years later, the program has more than 300 members, from 3 to 56 years old, of more than 25 nationalities.

Isn't love beautiful? How might stories like these inspire us to ease the suffering of immigrants?

Tell the stories of beautiful love, friends.

Amen.