

New Beginnings: The Story of Ruth and Naomi

Where You Go, I Will Go

Ruth 1

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This morning, we begin a new sermon series---New Beginnings: The Story of Ruth and Naomi. It's a good time to talk about new beginnings. School has just started for many of our young people. With that, there are new schools, new teachers, new friendships, and an opportunity to start fresh. If you spend any time on social media, you probably saw more than a few "first day of school" pictures. My former boss, Jim Warren, the senior minister of First Christian Church in Bloomington, IL, posted this picture of his four youngest kids as they headed off to junior high Friday.

Note Lydia, on the left. Compare her expression to the expressions on the faces of her siblings, Rebekah, Gabe, and Bethany. It would appear that, for Lydia, this opportunity for a new beginning pales in comparison to the carefree days of summer. I get it. My kids were never excited when school started. We joked in our house that I made summertime too much fun, so why would they want to return to school with its early start time, homework, and lack of freedom regarding one's activity choices. I am grateful for the teachers over the years who made first days of school so much fun so that, in our house, the second day of school was met with more enthusiasm than the first!

As an adult, I find the start of a new academic year to be a good time to give myself a new beginning as well. I think the years of being in school have just kind of trained me to think of this time of year as a beginning of something. The story of Ruth and Naomi has a number of beginnings in it. It has just as many endings. That's kind of how it has to work. Something has to end in order for something new to begin. Summer

vacation has to end in order for the new school year to begin. The reality is that whether we like it or not, things end and other things begin. It is necessary.

The book of Ruth is meant to be read, in some ways, like the parables of Jesus. It is a story that contains truth, but not necessarily facts. In other words, we can learn a lot from this story and from its characters. The story begins in Bethlehem where there is a famine. This is especially ironic from a story telling perspective because Bethlehem means “house of bread.” In the “house of bread” there is literally no bread. Because of this, Elimelech, who was married to Naomi, left his homeland with his wife and two sons, (Ma lon) Mahlon and Chilion.

They go to Moab. Moab is the region east of Judah (where Bethlehem is), just on the opposite side of the Dead Sea. Moab and Israel, because of their close proximity to each other share some history. Moab is the setting for the book of Deuteronomy---it is where the wandering Israelites camped as they waited to enter the promised land. It is the place where Moses died and was buried. In spite of this shared history, the people of Moab were referred to as “belonging to the nations,” which is code for they were “the other.”

Interestingly, if we go back to Genesis, we discover that the Moabites are related to the Israelites. Recall from Genesis 19, Abraham’s nephew, Lot, had two sons. Their names were Moab and (Amon) Ammon. Moab is the son who was born of an incestuous act between Lot and his daughters. Yes, the Bible is full of little skeletons in the closet. My point is that moving from Bethlehem to Moab was not desirable. Elimelech would not have taken his family there if there had been other options.

Once in Moab, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi with her two sons. They married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. After about 10 years, the

sons both died, leaving Naomi and her two daughters in law on their own. As you know, in this highly patriarchal culture, women without men were vulnerable. The status of either widowhood or childlessness, or both, meant loss of income, status, and property. Such a woman suffered a loss of identity and had limited options. She was the embodiment of famine. Naomi went from a pretty enviable, secure social position; married with two sons, to essentially nobody.

Naomi somehow received word, while in Moab, that the famine was over in Bethlehem. She made the decision to return home. At this point, Orpah and Ruth were still with her. Marriage wasn't just about the man and the woman married, it was about the woman joining the man's family forever. When their husbands died, Orpah and Ruth were still part of their husbands' family. The three women began the trip to Naomi's home. At some point, though, Naomi stopped and urged her daughters in law to return to their homes of origin. She said,

“Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.”

Naomi was being very pragmatic about her situation and her inability to provide what her daughters in law needed...men. You see, if a woman

was widowed and had no son, she had no right to inheritance since the goods were passed down from men to men. Because of this, there was an ancient custom called levirate marriage which allows the woman to be married to the next surviving brother for the purpose of having a son. If a son was born in to the marriage, he stood in for his father and received his father's inheritance. Naomi explained to the women that even if she found another husband that very day, married him and had sons immediately, it would be too long for them to wait.

No, they would be much better off to go back to their families of origin and hope to find another husband who would secure their future.

Naomi was giving Orpah and Ruth the opportunity to choose an identity. This would have been a rare gift in that culture. They could choose the house, lineage, and name to which they would belong. In this "in between space", between Moab and Bethlehem, Orpah and Ruth could choose who they wanted to be. This was unexpected. Even in the face of this reality (and gift), the women cried and resisted.

Naomi seemingly wouldn't take no for an answer. Orpah kissed her mother in law and walked away. Ruth would not leave Naomi, though.

This is what she said,

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

With these words, Ruth states her intention to stay with Naomi. She chooses who she is going to be. Her words reflect undeterred love that stands out against their dire circumstances. Ruth makes a vow, a covenant with Naomi. Her commitment to Naomi restores a family that had been decimated by death. The marriage that tied Ruth to Naomi had been destroyed by death, yet this covenant affirms an understanding of family that is informed by unrelenting love and faithfulness, or in Hebrew, hesed, which by definition knows no bounds. Ruth's words form a new reality, a new family, and a new identity, a new beginning.

This new thing that begins is brought about solely by Ruth's "I will not let you go" love for both Naomi's God which is now Ruth's God, "Your people shall be my people, your God, my God..." and for Naomi herself. And I believe this same kind of love is the thing that will bring about the new beginnings this nation, and the world, desperately need as well. We are loved by a God whose hesed for all human beings has no end. And if we believe that, we are called to the same level of love for this world.

Hesed is an action word. It is more than an emotion or attitude. It is something that must be demonstrated and is especially noticeable when times are hard. Like right now in our nation. The events in Charlottesville have ripped the band-aid off of a very old wound which we have known for a very long time has remained open, unable to heal. There have certainly been other events in our recent history that have reminded us the band-aid is there, and even pulled it back, but the terrorism in Charlottesville, ripped it off completely.

Hatred, associated with racism and xenophobia, is alive in our nation. We desperately need a new beginning, but here's the thing, we cannot have a new beginning without an ending. We have to act to bring about an end to hatred. And, this may seem too dramatic for some of you, but

I am convinced it is up to us. The politicians are not working together to end hatred. The division in Washington D.C. and Oklahoma City is deeply entrenched, with no end in sight. Even the religious leaders advising high level leaders are either not being heard or their idea of the biblical concept of hesed and what it means to follow the ways of Jesus is completely flawed. It is up to us to figure out what it means to act out “love that will not let go,” and do it.

Friends, we do not get to hate, dismiss, or write off other human beings because we disagree with them. We don't get to hate the ones who hurt us and other people. Like Ruth, we are at an important turning point, a point where we have to choose who we are going to be, what our identity will be. Will we align ourselves with the ones who, in this important time, choose walls, guns, bombs, torches, hateful rhetoric, symbols of racism, and fear of the other? Or will we align ourselves with the One whose love builds bridges and not walls, who calls us to be peacemakers, to be humble, to be kind, and to have courage in the face of our fear?

This week, we leave the story of Ruth and Naomi on the cusp of a new beginning brought about hesed. Ruth has made a vow, which is essentially, “My love for you has no end. Wherever you go, whatever you encounter, I will stand with you.” With whom do we need to share this promise?

As we name the people who need to hear this message, I will respond with, “Our love for you has no end.” I ask you to respond with, “Wherever you go, whatever you encounter, we will stand with you.” So, tell me, who do we need to make this promise to?

The congregation lifted up:

Amen.