

*“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God.”*

The book of Ruth is a short story too often overlooked. Today we’re going to do something about it. Her story is worth remembering; after all, she’s the great-grandmother of King David, and she experienced God’s grace and provision in her own right. So let’s set the stage a little.

Imagine life back in the days of the Judges. Moses and Joshua are gone. The great kings of Israel have not yet come. These are the “in-between” years of the Jewish people, marked by war after war. If you’re familiar with personalities like Samson—this was their time. And it was time for the human drama Ruth experienced.

Imagine a family, living in Bethlehem during this rough and tumble time, and this family—Father Elimelech, mother Naomi—and two sons, leaves town to seek food and refuge in another country, due to famine and scarcity. Imagine that while living in this forbidden land, named Moab, (present day Jordan), the two sons meet some girls, and one thing leads to another, and now there are two daughters-in-law. Although the marriage of God’s people to Moabite women was not expressly forbidden by the Law, it certainly would’ve seemed like a point of compromise, raising mixed emotions. Ruth and Orpah, the new additions to the family, would never be allowed entrance into the assembly of the Lord (Dt. 23:3), that is, if they ever returned to Jerusalem.

Now, imagine, the tragedy and sorrow that accompanied the deaths of all three men--husband and sons. That family left Bethlehem to escape disaster, but it found them anyway, more terribly than they could’ve dreamed. The women are left with nothing. No possibility of work, food, or home. History is not kind to women left alone. Naomi must dismiss her daughters to the mercy of their homeland, and she must also find mercy with her own people. With many spilled tears their family is broken.

Naomi encourages these daughters to return to their Moabite culture. Naomi thinks they can still find a life with their own people. It’s not too late for them, even if it’s too late for her. Orpah leaves and returns to her homeland. But Ruth simply clings to her mother-in-law, holds her close. Something has happened to her. The Moabite god is not her god anymore and the Moabite people are not her people. In verses 16 & 17, Ruth confesses her commitment and faith, *“Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”*

Here is yet another example of how an old, mostly—forgotten Bible story can have immediate application and relevance to our lives. How’s that? Well, look around. We live in an age where faith is not necessarily passed down by families any longer. Our spiritual fathers and mothers are not necessarily our biological fathers and mothers. We live in an

age described by death, divorce, and distance. Our Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner tables are examples of this reality. The people with whom we break bread, share our lives, and spend our holidays become family without the bloodline.

Jesus teaches about this new family in Matthew 12. While pointing to his disciples and followers he says, *“Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* Do you hear that? These are words of comfort to people who don’t meet the traditional criteria. Relationship to God is not based on race or ethnicity but instead on a connection that Jesus has made with you. That means those who live your faith with you are your family. This is just one of the great changes made possible by Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrected life. You can’t look at Ruth’s skin color, or sin baggage, or religious history and define who she is. You have to look at her love. She loves Naomi, her mother-in-law, and not only that, she has fallen in love with Naomi’s God.

A major part of being a Christian community is accepting and enjoying this new identity. Everyone enters with baggage and history, but Jesus changes all that. Even from his own cross, Jesus was showing us a new way to be. He pleads with His Father in heaven to forgive people; He tells his friend John to become a son to his mother; He informs the thief next to Him that he’ll be a guest at the banquet in heaven. Things that were formerly impossible become possible, thanks to Him. He shows us what love is, even while suffering and dying. He is dying so that we can be forgiven and then imitate His love—a love that looks beyond bloodlines—a love that understands that those who live your faith with you are your family.

A beautiful example is found in adoption. A young man named Chris Branscome was adopted as a young child and shares that as an adopted son, he’s had to ask the question over and over again in his life: What is family based on, blood or love? The two are often not the same. His father and mother are the Branscomes—the couple who took him in as an infant, fed him, gave him safety, security, and faith. They applauded for him at his high school graduation. They applauded again at his college graduation, and they now grandparent his daughter. They are mom and dad. That is Christ’s way of life. Adoption creates the new family. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is that adoption. You and I have been baptized into a new family, given a new identity, and a new way of thinking and acting in Christ.

The story of Ruth ends with newness all around. For Ruth, a new husband, Boaz, and new promises. A new grandmother, Naomi, gets to hold her grandchild. This child, named Obed, is family to her not because of blood, but because Ruth continues to call her family. This child will one day have a child of his own named Jesse, and one of Jesse’s sons will be David, the eventual King of Israel. Isn’t that something? If Ruth doesn’t stay with Naomi, is there a King David to ascend the throne?

Maybe your stories are just as confusing and beautiful. Maybe, by your love, you’ve turned friends into family. Maybe you know the power of adoptive love and can relate to Ruth on that level. Just know this: when you reach out in self-giving love to another

person, blood-related or not, God's dream for mankind is being made into reality. The key is the cross of Jesus Christ, and the price He paid upon it. The cross of Christ washes away sins and begins repairing isolation and brokenness. The cross of Christ ushers in a new way of thinking that creates new life among people who adopt each other as family. Make this promise to someone in Jesus' name: "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

*I gratefully acknowledge the writings of Rev. Dr. John R. Wilch and Rev. Jim Mueller as theological guideposts for this sermon. —Pastor Mark Matzke*

