

**8.29.21 Ruth - A Story of Acceptance, Kindness, and Loyalty Ruth 1.1-22**  
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One doesn't have to look long or hard at our lives, around our nation or the world, to see much grief and loss from our own pain to wildfires and floods, the situation in Afghanistan and the ongoing pandemic. We're not the first people to experience difficult and traumatic circumstances and we can learn from how others have coped. Today we're going to look at a story that begins with overwhelming grief and loss. It focusses on two women who are during their lives, daughters, wives, and mothers. Naomi is the mother-in-law of Ruth.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is found in the Book of Ruth which begins at a time in Israel's history when there is **no king**, we're told it was "*in the days the judges ruled,*" and there was **no food**, "*there was a famine in the land*" (Ruth 1:1). Much like the poor, frightened, and desperate people trying to get out of Afghanistan or from north Africa to Europe or to the US through Mexico, Naomi, and her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion – make the risky decision to flee their home in the hope of finding a better life. Naomi and her family leave **Bethlehem** which is five miles south of Jerusalem and travel perhaps some 20 to 30 miles or more east of the Dead Sea and south of the river Arnon to the land of Moab. The Israelites believed that the Moabites were related to them through the nephew of Abraham whose name was Lot (Genesis 19:37), but because the Moabites didn't give the Israelites food and water on their journey out of Egypt, it says in **Deuteronomy 23** that no "***Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord***" and there were hard feelings for generations, yet this is where Naomi's family chose to go. The situation for Naomi's family grows much more serious when her husband dies leaving her and their two sons even more vulnerable. The young men each married Moabite women, but sadly after they'd lived in Moab about ten years both of Naomi's sons died leaving their wives as widows and their mother with no husband and no sons. It's hard to imagine what it must feel like to be living in an unfamiliar country and to lose so many members of one's family and to feel alone and unsupported with nowhere to turn for help.

You might be surprised how many people we have at BBC who were born and raised in another country but who married someone from the United States and who, like Naomi, don't have a lot or any of their family and relatives close by. One of the benefits of being a part of the church is that it can provide the kind of love and support we all need even when we don't have our family around us as Naomi no longer did.

Naomi had lost her husband and then both of her sons and she had to cope with her sense of grief and loss and figure out what she would do and how she would survive. Listen to **Ruth 1.8-22**, "8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "*Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. **May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me.** 9 **May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.**" Then **she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud** 10 and said to her, "*We will go back with you to your people.*" 11 But Naomi said, "**Return home, my daughters.** Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12 **Return home, my daughters;** I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— 13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, **my daughters.** It is **more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!**" 14 **At this they wept aloud again.** Then Orpah **kissed her** mother-in-law **goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.** 15 "Look," said Naomi, "*your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.*"*

16 But Ruth replied, "**Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die 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.**" 18

When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

19 So the two women went on until they came to **Bethlehem**. When they arrived in **Bethlehem**, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "*Can this be Naomi?*" 20 "*Don't call me Naomi, [Pleasant]*" she told them. "*Call me Mara, [Bitter] because the Almighty [Shaddai] has made my life very **bitter.*** 21 I went

*away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.”*

22 So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, arriving in **Bethlehem** as the barley harvest was beginning.”

While it’s true that Naomi had experienced great affliction and misfortune, she had not come back totally empty, that was an emotional statement on her part, because she had Ruth. The women in this scripture demonstrate several admirable qualities that we’re wise to practice. The first is Compassion. **Compassion** is **“sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others.”** Ruth had obviously bonded closely with her mother-in-law Naomi and recognized that she had suffered the tremendous loss of her husband and both her sons. She had so much compassion for Naomi that she wasn’t going to let her go back to her hometown of Bethlehem alone. If you reflect on a time when you were hurting or grieving, and for some of you that may be now, don’t you remember the people who showed you compassion, sympathy, and concern? I think we usually do.

When we have compassion for another person we feel their pain, we’re moved to help, and we want to be of assistance. Jesus is often portrayed as having compassion for people. **Mark 6:34** says, *“As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* In **Luke 5:12-14** a man covered with leprosy, a terrible disease, begged Jesus, *“Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.”* Jesus **moved with compassion** stretches out his hand, touches and heals him. If you want to be like Jesus, if you say he is your Lord and Savior, if you say you serve him, then be a person who demonstrates and shares love and compassion. **Compassion connects us to other people in their time of need and helps them feel that God has not abandoned them.**

**Compassion, the capacity to care for others, especially when they’re hurting is vital to healthy relationships.** When we’re hurting emotionally or physically is when we need compassion the most. One of the things my mother often said that always challenged me was, **“Be your best self.”** Our ability to show compassion often reflects our best self and that compassion is not limited to our care even for other

people. Compassion is what motivates folks who try to help rescue stranded dolphins or who take an injured animal to Wild Care. When we have compassion in our heart, we want to alleviate suffering. That's what Ruth wants to do for Naomi.

A second quality we see in the story of Ruth is **Acceptance**. We see this in the relationship of Ruth and Naomi. Some parents may not welcome the news that their son or daughter is going to marry someone from a different culture and religion. Naomi is accepting of both her sons marrying Moabite women. This is a very different attitude than we find in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. These books reflect different times and different traditions within Biblical faith. It's interesting how books of the Bible can present opposite perspectives and debate with each other. After her daughter-in-law Orpah tearfully departed, Naomi tells Ruth to follow in her steps and to return home (**Ruth 1:15**) *"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."* Ruth basically says, *"No way, I'm staying by your side."*

In families and in friendships, with people we work with or go to school with, healthy relationships require acceptance, often of people who think, feel, believe, and act differently than we do. We also need to accept that no one is perfect, including ourselves. We all have areas in which we need to grow and flaws that may never be overcome. **Acceptance** is vital to healthy relationships because we learn we're loved and cared for and we love and care for other people **for who they are as they are**. The opposite of genuine acceptance is a form of conditional love or acceptance which is reflected in sayings or attitudes like, *"If you love me, you'll do this... or I'll love you so long as you do this..."* or *"If you do this, I'll be your friend"* or *"If you don't do this then you can't be my friend."* These are all expressions of conditional love, conditional friendship, or manipulation. **Acceptance strengthens relationships because we know we're loved for who we are.**

A third quality we see in Ruth and Naomi's relationship is **Kindness**. **Kindness is "the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate."** Kindness is truly one of the greatest things in the world. Ruth and Orpah had been so devoted to their husbands that Naomi says with great emotion and affection (Ruth 1:8), ***"May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to***

*me.*” Kindness is mentioned in many Bible verses as one of the characteristics of God. I’ll just share two: **Nehemiah 9:17**, **“You are a God of forgiveness, Gracious and compassionate, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.”** **Titus 3:4-5**, **“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”**

We see kindness by the third major character in the story of Ruth and that’s **Boaz**. Boaz belonged to the family of Naomi’s deceased husband Elimelech. In Ruth 2, he asks who this unfamiliar young woman belongs to who is reaping in his field, and he’s told she is a **Moabite** who came back with Naomi from the country of **Moab**. The two-fold emphasis on her being a foreigner is clear. She has been polite and worked hard from early morning. He speaks to her respectfully, calling her “my daughter,” gives her instructions to stay near his young men who orders not to bother her, encourages her to stop and drink water whenever she needs to, and asks God’s blessing on her for all she has done for her mother-in-law noting she also had to leave her own parents and people. He even tells his workers to pull out some handfuls of grain from the bundles and to leave them for her. Boaz is very kind to Ruth and she is overwhelmed with gratitude, saying (Ruth 2.10), **“Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?”** Boaz notices a foreigner in need, and he is kind and generous.

There is a tremendous need for kindness in all relationships and in the world. If you’re going to be anything in life, be kind. So much of politics has become just angry, mean, insulting speech. It’s disgusting. The media in all its forms is dripping with disdain, pontification, accusation, self-righteousness, ignorance, and rage. In the 1939 classic movie starring Jimmy Stewart, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, he says in a filibuster on the floor of the senate, *“It seemed like a pretty good idea, getting boys from all over the country, boys of all nationalities and ways of living. Getting them together. Let them find out what makes different people tick the way they do. Because I wouldn’t give you two cents for all your fancy rules if, behind them, **they didn’t have a little bit of plain, ordinary, everyday kindness and a - a little lookin’ out for the other fella,***

*too...That's pretty important, all that. It's just the blood and bone and sinew of this democracy that some great men handed down to the human race, that's all."*

That may sound quaint, but kindness has never gone out of style, and it brings a smile to people's faces and helps to create and strengthen relationships. Even in her overwhelming grief, Naomi can't forget the kindness Orpah, and Ruth have shared with her and her sons. **Kindness lives long in our memories; it enriches relationships, and it strengthens communities.**

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, we see **Compassion, Acceptance, Kindness,** and finally, **Loyalty.** Ruth demonstrates great loyalty when she says to Naomi, ***"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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 die I will die, and there I will be buried."*** Ruth understands the depth of Naomi's loss, she has become a widow herself and it is her sense of loyalty and devotion that moves her to leave her homeland to accompany Naomi safely back to Bethlehem.

The first time Ruth goes to the field of Boaz, she is looking for food to help her mother-in-law and herself to survive. Ruth returns, after being instructed by Naomi, looking for a husband, and she wins the favor of Boaz. A Moabite peasant woman, an outsider with no status whatsoever, asks Boaz, a man of Israel to fulfill the ancient law of Israel's God and to act as the next of kin to protect the honor of the family that Ruth had married into. Boaz says to her (Ruth 3.10), ***"May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first."***

Judges, which was last week's book, has a violent and depressing end. I like stories that have happy endings like the book of Ruth. The movement of the story of Ruth begins downward with no king, no food, eventually no husband, no sons, no name, and emptiness. Then the story moves upward as Ruth finds food gleaning in the fields and a husband, Boaz, and they have a son, Obed, and eventually there is even **a king as Ruth, a Moabite, is the great grandmother of King David and she becomes part of Jesus' family tree and much of this story happens in Bethlehem where Jesus was born.** If we want to look for people in the Bible to be role models of healthy relationships, three of the best are Naomi, an Israelite mother-in-law, Ruth, her Moabite

daughter-in-law, and Boaz, Ruth's second husband – may we live up to and emulate their example of **Compassion, Acceptance, Kindness and Loyalty**.

**Blessing** from Zechariah, 7:9-10a, “And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: **“This is what the LORD Almighty said: ‘Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.’”**

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. When you hear the word, “Compassion,” what comes to mind? If you had to portray compassion with a color, what would you choose? If you wanted to reflect compassion in music, what would it sound like?
2. Naomi was displaced by famine and suffered the loss of her husband and both sons. Have you ever gone through a tough time, maybe not as bad as Naomi, and been blessed by someone who showed you compassion? What did she or he do that made a difference for you?
3. How does Ruth show compassion for her mother-in-law Naomi (for additional insights read Ruth chapters 1 and 2)?
4. Ruth and Naomi are from different peoples with their own customs and faiths, yet they accept one another and care for one another. Why is being able to accept someone who is different than ourselves important?
5. Kindness is *“the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate.”* How does Boaz show kindness to Ruth? Reflect on someone you know who embodies “kindness” which is also a fruit of the spirit (Galatians 5:22). What does kindness add to our lives? To our society?
6. How is commitment demonstrated in Ruth and Naomi's relationship? Why is commitment so important for our relationships? How can you grow in the qualities demonstrated by Ruth and Naomi?