

SCRIPTURE: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

This scripture is a portion of a four-chapter book in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. It tells the story of the great-grandmother of King David, a foreign woman named Ruth.

Ruth came to the little town of Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi's husband and family were from Bethlehem. But because of a famine, Naomi and her family had moved to the land of Moab, about fifty miles away. Ruth was from Moab, a land on the east side of the Dead Sea.

SERMON: "Ruth, a Love Story"

Most of us enjoy hearing, telling or watching a love story, don't we? Love stories usually follow a certain pattern: boy meets girl and they fall in love. But there are obstacles in the way of their relationship. As the story unfolds, the difficulties are slowly resolved until finally the couple is able to marry, and there is a great celebration. And then they live happily ever after.

Why do you think that love stories are so appealing? I think when the lovers overcome all obstacles it fascinates and intrigues us. Oh, and the "happily ever after" fantasy captivates us, too! We secretly wish that our own families could resolve all difficulties and become deeply satisfying, "happy ever after" relationships.

In real life, we know that there may be times of great happiness, contentment and joy in our marriages and families especially when life is fairly stable and secure, when we celebrate family milestones, when there are moments of peace, and when love is expressed. In those good times it seems as if God is smiling on us and on our family.

But we also know that there are times of great stress in our families. When we move to a new home or new community, when we find a new job, when we enter into a new relationship, when we decide to have a child – all of these choices create anxiety for us. These may all be positive things, but they can also be stressful.

Then there are things that we consider negative that cause pressure. There may be not enough money, time or desire to celebrate the good things of life with our

family. Life may bring us other unexpected challenges: accidents, crime, drug abuse, unemployment, war, injury, illness and death. In those times we may feel profound grief, loss, anger, fear, sorrow, and regret. We may feel bitterness toward God, as if God is dealing harshly with us.

That is what Naomi felt. When she returned home to Bethlehem she said, “Call me no longer Naomi, the pleasant person. Instead, call me Mara, the bitter one, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.”

But let’s go back to the beginning of the story. Naomi and her husband Elimelech were from Bethlehem, just five miles south of Jerusalem. They had two sons, two young men, Mahlon and Chilion. Life was reasonably good.

But then, there was a famine; the crops failed on Elimelech’s land and there was not much food. So Elimelech took his wife and two sons to another land. Although Moab was only fifty or sixty miles away on the east side of the Dead Sea, in that day it would have been a hazardous three-day journey on foot with the family carrying all their possessions. This was a family of refugees, cut off from home and family and depending on the hospitality of others.

The family stayed in Moab. The two sons, Mahlon and Chilion were growing up. But then a second tragedy touched the family. Elimelech, their father, died. Now it was the sons who were responsible to care for their mother, Naomi. As time went by, the sons met and married young women from Moab, and things seemed better for the family. But then tragedy struck for the third time, and both sons, Mahlon and Chilion died. The family had only lived in Moab for ten years, and now all three of the men were dead.

The Bible does not tell the details of how these three men died. Was it poor diet and a possible poisoning from bad meat? Was it a fall in the mountains of Moab while following a stray sheep? Was there an illness that swept the community and took many lives? Whatever the cause, Naomi and the two young women, Orpah and Ruth, must have shed many tears as they grieved the loss of their men. Not only was the family they had established shattered, the women were left without protection and a source of income or food.

In the patriarchal culture of the Old Testament, a woman was the possession of her father until she was married, and then she became the possession of her

husband. A loving father and husband would have cared for his wife and daughters and protected them from those who would exploit or abuse them; but an abusive father and husband could demand strict obedience from his wife and daughters; they would become his servants. And he could for all intents and purposes sell his daughters off to the suitor who could give him the largest dowry. He could do this without regard for the safety, desires or wishes of his daughter. And a woman who did not have the protection of a father, husband, brother or sons was in a perilous place.

What was Naomi to do? She knew that her family was respected back in Bethlehem. And she had heard that there was now food available at home – the famine was over. Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, were still young women. They could go back home to their fathers and mothers and find protection; and they might also marry again. So Naomi decided to say goodbye to her daughters-in-law and make the journey home to Bethlehem.

Naomi said kind words to her daughters: “May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt kindly with my sons and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your (new) husband.” Then she kissed them and they wept aloud.

But the young women said to their mother-in-law, “No we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi urged them to return to their parents’ homes. She said to them, “My daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” And again these women wept together.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and turned around to go back to her parents’ house. But Ruth hugged her mother-in-law and said to her, “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.”

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she no longer tried to persuade Ruth to go home. So the two of them journeyed on together.

When they reached Bethlehem news quickly spread, as it does in a small town. “Naomi has come home,” people said, “and she has brought her daughter-in-law with her.” Naomi told her family and friends the sad news of the death of her

husband and sons. “I went away full,” she said, “and I came back empty.” She told them how bitter she felt toward God, and she told them how much loyalty and love Ruth had given her.

Naomi had a relative in Bethlehem, a prominent wealthy man named Boaz. He was from Elimelech’s family. It was the beginning of the barley harvest season, and Boaz hired young men and women to work in his fields and harvest barley. According to the customs of that day, those who cut the grain stalks always left some grain uncut in the edges and corners of the fields so that poor people could follow them and cut this grain so that they would have food. Ruth said to Naomi, “Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor.” Naomi gave her permission, and Ruth went out to the barley fields.

Now it happened that she began to follow the workers in the fields belonging to Boaz. When Boaz came out to check on his reapers, he saw a young woman that he had not hired at work harvesting the left-over grain. He said to the foreman of his crew, “To whom does this young woman belong?” The foreman said that she was the woman from Moab who had come to Bethlehem with Naomi, and that she had politely asked if she could follow his reapers. And he said, “She has been on her feet working since early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.”

Isn’t it interesting that we often assume that the poor are lazy, when in fact many poor people work long hours at two or more jobs just to try to pay their bills and care for their families. Just like Ruth, many poor people in our society are hard-working and want to pay their own way.

Boaz went to speak to Ruth. He said to her, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women... I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go drink from the water vessels that the young men have brought.”

Ruth fell down with her face to the ground before Boaz, a sign of deep humility, and she said to him, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” Boaz answered, “I have heard all that you have done for your mother-in-law since your husband died, and how you left your

own family to come to this land which you do not know. May the Lord reward you for what you have done.”

Ruth thanked Boaz for his kindness, and he invited her to join his workers when it was mealtime, to sit with them and eat the meal of bread and sour wine with them. Isn't that interesting? Bread and wine offered in a shared meal – a kind of communion.

And so Ruth continued to harvest grain in those fields with the protection and favor of the owner. By the end of the day she had harvested about five gallons of grain. When she returned to Bethlehem that evening Ruth shared her bountiful harvest and told Naomi all that had happened that day.

Then Naomi said, “May God bless Boaz for his kindness!” And so for the rest of the barley harvest, Ruth went out each day and followed the workers in his fields.

Now we come to our scripture for today. Naomi has been thinking about how to find security for Ruth, and how kind Boaz has been to her. Perhaps Ruth should let Boaz know that she is available for marriage. In that culture a woman would lie down at the feet of a sleeping man and when he awoke he would know that she was available.

And so Ruth did this. At Naomi's urging she washed up and put on her best clothes, and went to the threshing floor. It was night. Boaz had eaten and drunk well and laid down to sleep. Ruth came to where he was sleeping, and quietly uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight Boaz woke up and was startled to find a woman lying at his feet. “Who are you?” he asked. “I am Ruth, your servant,” she said. “Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next of kin.”

Boaz was delighted that this young woman had come to him, rather than going after one of the young men. Her loyalty to him and to her mother-in-law had impressed him. And so he agreed to see if he could marry her. This involved finding out if an even nearer relative would want to marry her, as was the custom. It also meant that Boaz would need to buy the field that had been owned by Naomi's husband, Elimelech. When he acquired Ruth and her husband's inheritance, Boaz was also agreeing that if Ruth and he had any children they would be in the name of her former husband, Mahlon, so that he was not forgotten in the community.

In the morning, Boaz sent Ruth back to Naomi with another gift of six measures of barley to take to her mother-in-law. Then Boaz went to the assembly of elders beside the city gate to work out the legal arrangements for the purchase of the field and for marriage with Ruth. He talked with Elimelech's closer relative to see if he wanted to buy the field and marry Ruth, but the man declined. In a short time Boaz made the proper arrangements for purchase and marriage before witnesses.

Boaz and Ruth were married. In time Ruth had a son whose name was Obed. This child was a blessing to the whole family, bringing joy to Naomi's heart. She became his caregiver. Obed became the grandfather of David the great king of Israel and Judah.

So that is our love story. It is a story of love shared within a family and in a community. It is a story of family responsibilities that were taken seriously. It is a story of a community where there were provisions for the poor. And it is a story of hospitality toward the strangers who had come to a new land.

All of us have certain family responsibilities. May we meet our responsibilities to our families with grace and wisdom. It is my prayer that we as a people may always respect and provide for those who are poor and in need. And may we also continue to open our hearts and communities to those who are refugees and strangers in our midst. It is the right thing to do.