

“Just Friends”  
November 8, 2009  
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

I grew up singing hymns. I love to sing hymns. My entire life could be set to the music of hymns. When Joe and I were married, we just HAD to sing “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.” Whenever big decisions come my way, “Be thou my vision” is my deepest prayer. In those times when I feel hopeless and alone, I immediately turn to “O God Our Help of Ages Past.” The great scriptural truths, the great theological truths, I learned in hymns. But, sometimes, I wish our hymns had the emotional honesty of Israel’s hymns – the Psalms. Granted, we do have hymns about God being a mighty fortress and all those sweet hours of prayer. But, where are the hymns like Psalm 13 – “How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?” Where are the hymns like Psalm 58 – “The wicked go astray from the womb; O God, break the teeth in their mouths?” Where are the hymns like Psalm 102? “Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress?” I love hymns, but I love the Psalms even more because they are not afraid to take on God and real life. And, haven’t you had moments when you’ve wondered has God forgotten me forever? Or, would God please break the teeth in that mouth? Or, stop hiding from me, Lord. Be accountable to me, Lord. Be responsible for me, your servant.

Life hands us all kinds of things – good things, bad things, confusing things, things that make us scratch our heads and wonder, “What in the world is God thinking?” The Spanish mystic, Teresa of Avila once complained in prayer about her suffering, and the story goes that she heard Jesus say, “This is how I treat my friends.” She then responded, “No wonder you have so few.” If you’ve ever been in that spot, the one where God seems unexplainable, irresponsible and far away, then you know about Naomi and Ruth. Like the children’s book, they were living their own version of a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day...and it was a day without end.

Naomi was married to Elimelech and they faced a parental nightmare. A famine hit their little town of Bethlehem and they could not feed their children. So, they packed up and moved hoping for better luck and a fresh start. If only fresh starts were that easy. If only a new location with new people to meet and new places to see would eliminate life’s problems, but it does not. Their new start came with a fatal twist - Elimelech’s death. Naomi was left as a single mother in a foreign land with no one. But, single parents are resourceful, and she survived. She raised those boys, and they grew up and married Ruth and Orpah. Things were ok, until BOTH sons also died. It was just Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. Whatever would they do?

Their options as women were quite limited, and Naomi decided to pull up stakes and head back to Bethlehem. She advised Ruth and Orpah to stay right there in Moab and to try to snag themselves new husbands. That was the woman’s hope in those days. They disagreed with Naomi we get quite the battle of wills with split results. Orpah returned home. Frankly, I’ve always looked down on her for this decision. But, that’s really not fair. Her decision was one of common sense, and sometimes common sense prevails. So, Orpah went home.

But, not everyone can – nor wishes to – go home again. Ruth clung to her mother in law, they were just friends but she refused to leave. And, her beautiful words THEN are familiar to us NOW. Listen to them in the King James version. “Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if I ought but death part thee and me.”

I feel as though I'm eavesdropping on a very private conversation. Honestly, I want to cover my ears. Ruth's words are so strong, so passionate, so resolute that they embarrass us. In fact, we Christians often pull her words right out of context –if you imagine such a thing - and use them at weddings because they pledge the kind of faithfulness and passion that our world reserves for marriage. But, these words are the words of a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, just friends, one woman pledging herself in a covenant, committing herself to serve, care for, and stay by the other, in spite of common sense.

What inspired Ruth's loyalty? What inspired her outpouring of affection? What inspired her stubborn unwillingness to leave Naomi? If we are looking for logical, well-thought out reason, it's not there. But, maybe that's the point. When it comes to our relationships, our friendships, when they are most alive and spirit filled, they are not always the most reasonable. When they are most alive, we may take a chance that requires unreasonable courage that we do not have. We may go somewhere we would reasonably never go. We may laugh ourselves silly over something that reasonably should strike us as ridiculous or we may be brought to tears by an unreasonable act of compassion, or a word of understanding that comes out of nowhere.

I believe that when we begin to trust this gift of unreasonable loyalty, and unreasonable compassion, and unreasonable faith - God has room to get in and move around and create and do things that are, as the apostle Paul tells us, greater than we –and our reasonable, rational selves - can hope or imagine. Isn't that what happened with Jesus and his unreasonable love for us? Better things than we could imagine! God has space to set plans for us into action when we are not the center of our own attention – God uses us to do things – mighty God-soaked things – in the lives of others. And, do you want to know the really cool thing about that? It happens, God happens, quite often without us knowing a thing and sometimes, in fact, when we think God has forgotten us forever and we are stuck in this life with just friends.

You see, if you read the story of Ruth, you will find that God seems to have forgotten about things. God is not a leading character except that Naomi believes God has “dealt bitterly” with her –will you forget me forever? Answer me in my distress! And, yes, oddly enough, out of loyalty to her friend, Ruth claimed this bitter God, Naomi's God, as her God. But, we don't get the same Old Testament God in Ruth that we get in say, Exodus, when God is a major character sending plagues and parting seas and talking in a cloud of fire. But, here is what we do get in Ruth – a God who is very present and doing BIG things with just friends.

Here's how it goes. Naomi and Ruth got to Bethlehem. No mention of God providing anything for the trip. But, they get there *together* and Ruth catches the eye of a well to do farmer named Boaz. He was a little long in the tooth but still knew a good looking woman when he saw one, and before long, he took Ruth under his wing – told his hired hands to leave her alone. Had her over for a meal, and when she asked him why he was being so nice to her, he said he'd heard how good she'd been to Naomi, who happened to be a distant cousin of his, and as far as he was concerned it had been a bad year, and he was available to help. No mention of God gearing up, but Naomi roars into action. She's out of her depression, and she saw the way the wind was blowing long before Ruth did. It was obvious that old Boaz had the hots for Ruth, and Naomi (no longer centered on her own bitterness) comes up with a plan. And, it works.

Lo and behold, Boaz marries Ruth. You know the story. First came love. Then came marriage. Then came Ruth with a baby carriage! They have a bouncing baby boy. Ruth is happy. Boaz is happy, and Naomi is happy. Because, as her friends remind her, this baby will nourish her in her old age “for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than

seven sons, has borne him.” Naomi loves that baby so much – as any Nana does – that the women of the neighborhood tease her. A son was born to Naomi, they say. It is a happy story.

But, where is God in this? Did God forget Naomi and Ruth? Read the story. It feels that way. Naomi and Ruth were the ones to make decisions to make their lives better. Not God. Naomi and Ruth were the ones who made a way out of no way. Not God. Why all this pressure on them? Wasn't it God's job to do something? To be a little more proactive?

That was the question recently posed to the News and Observer's "Voices of Faith" series. The Rev. Holly McKissick, pastor of St. Andrew Christian Church in Kansas answered this way. *In my dreams, I want a protector - a righteous army, an all-powerful mom - who can protect me, my family and all I love. Don't we all? Some even imagine a super hero God swooping down to save the day. Yet, it is not God's job alone to cherish and protect. It's our job. God has no hands but ours with which to heal, no voice but ours with which to speak. We are the ones we've been waiting for. When we face challenging moments at home or on the world stage, throwing our hands up and looking to the heavens for protection won't work. Heaven only knows God needs the best our hands, hearts and minds can offer.*

While it seemed that God was far away, Ruth and Naomi still loved each other, and love is the best proof we have that God is here, alive and well. When we love each other, we are allowed to experience for ourselves just a little bit of God. And, when we love each other with the best that our hearts and hands and minds can offer, God is there, working things out – often without us knowing. Did the name of Ruth's baby mean anything to you? It was Obed. Do you remember who Obed was? Obed was the grandfather of the great King David. And, you do remember who was a descendant of King David, right? He's kind of a big star in Christian circles. It was Jesus. Jesus can be traced back to Ruth – the same Ruth who was just friends with Naomi. The same Ruth who married old man Boaz. So, through this same Ruth, a poor and childless foreigner – she ain't from around here – God is at work.

Ruth's offered the best that she had to her friend, and that was the only opening God needed. God's plan for the redemption of the world jumped into action. Jesus Christ. The loyalty and commitment between these two friends played a very important part in God's plan to meet the hopes and fears of all the years. Let that be an inspiration to you. We never know. We never know completely the meaning of our lives or the impact of our lives, but we are given to each other. No conversation is too short. No friendship is too small. No effort is unnoticed because you just never know when God is working or how God is working through you. The God of ages past is our hope for years to come, and blest be the tie that binds us to that God and to each other.