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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Ruth 4:13-22

14 November 2021

Knowing Your Story

Opening Prayer: God of the great story, may you be honored in our testimony, in our stories of how you have transformed us. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear how you have been working throughout our lives from our beginnings to our ends. May your grace and love carry us into life together. And may the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. In Jesus' name. Amen

Message: We have come to the end of our journey with Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi. The last 9 verses ring familiar to us as we remember the beginning of this story. After ten years in Moab and the death of her husband and two sons, Naomi returns to Bethlehem. The women of the village are talking about her again as they did then, but at the end of the story, their words are not a question of her identity after all these years, but how God has brought about a different ending. The Lord, who had supposedly brought her back empty when she first stepped foot in Bethlehem, has not left her in her bitterness and contempt. She has a son now, an heir to the inheritance of Elimelech, a restorer and nourisher of the family's life and vitality. Not only do the women of Bethlehem call this special moment a blessing from God, they also take the time to celebrate with Naomi in naming her third son Obed, the grandfather of King David.

We will spend our time this morning, exploring a few key notes from Ruth 4 that might help us tie these final moments with the rest of the story. In verse 13, the narrator of Ruth's story

mentions the Lord for only the second time. In all of the other times that the Lord is mentioned, it is by one of the characters, usually in relation to their present situation. When the narrator first mentions the Lord in Ruth 1:6, God has restored life to the agricultural land of Israel, inspiring Naomi's return with Ruth. In Ruth 4:13, through Boaz and Ruth's marriage, the Lord restores life to the family of Elimelech through a son for Naomi, an heir for the land, which inspires the blessing of the local village women and leads to Naomi's restoration in village life.

In verses 14-15, we hear in the women of Bethlehem's first speech echoes of important Hebrew words, which we have explored in previous weeks. We encounter again the role of redemption that Obed will fulfill in Naomi's life when he is called the family redeemer. In addition, the most often occurring word from chapter 1, the Hebrew word for "return," is used by the women. In the beginning of verse 15, my translation says that Obed will be a restorer of life, but the Hebrew word for *restorer* is the same as the one used in chapter 1 for *return*, so verse 15 could also read that Obed will return life to Naomi. At least in the narrator's mind, God's role in the story seems to be that of resolution, restoration, and life-giving redemption. In physically returning to Bethlehem after the return of life to the agricultural potential of the land, Naomi receives God's return of life to her empty existence.

When we read the end of verse 15 and all of 16, we rejoice with Naomi and Ruth. Ruth has been, for Naomi, better than the perfect family. In ancient Israelite folklore, the perfect or ideal family was one with seven sons, yet the women of the village seem to be making a subversive statement here in acknowledging the inestimable value of Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law. Yet even in the village women's words about Ruth being worth more to Naomi than the ideal allotment of male children, we also realize that even as Ruth is venerated by the women of Bethlehem, she seems to be quickly fading into the background of the story as quickly as she

became the central character. The village women cannot even bring themselves to use her name in their blessing of Naomi. I am not sure how to think about this moment, especially when Ruth has done the lions-share of the work and risk-taking in the story, yet Naomi reaps the benefit in a son that Ruth seems to willingly release to her. Ruth's character again shines through as a woman of *khesed*, or steadfast love that extend beyond the expectations of law or neighbor.

In verse 17 then, we might get our final, subtle reference to Ruth through her son. Note that the village women do not say that a son has been borne to Ruth for Naomi. Only Naomi is mentioned. Yet, in the name that the women of Bethlehem give the son, we hear the character and triumph of his birth-mother. Obed's name means *one who serves*, which seems to me to be an echo of the life and witness of his foreign, nameless mother at least among the ancient Israelites of Bethlehem. The only person who can use her name, and even that, with the description of her as a Moabite or foreigner, is Boaz, a very telling detail in the story because Boaz is the only one who seems to have seen Ruth for who she truly is, a woman of substance.

Finally, in the genealogical summary at the end of our story, we read 10 generations listed from Judah to King David, the traditional form of the ideal royal genealogical line. Note that we do not hear of Ruth, but of Boaz in this line. We will not hear of Ruth again in the biblical story until the birth of the Messiah in the book of Matthew. Thinking about genealogies and those who have gone before us is especially pertinent as we begin to reflect on the 500-year anniversary of anabaptism as a Christian movement in our world. Those who have gone before us as Ruth did before David, and even Jesus, shaped who they would become. I wonder if the story of David's great-grandmother was a common story in David's family. Did Jesse speak of the fierce and loyal love of his grandmother, a love that carried her into a foreign land, a foreign language, and a risk-filled attempt at finding her and her mother-in-law's security?

When I was nearing the end of my 8th grade year in middle school, I wrote a paper about my paternal grandmother's ancestors, who were farmers in Indiana in the early 1800s. I traced their movements from Indiana to Oklahoma to Texas to Illinois where my grandmother met my grandfather. Growing up, I remember my mom telling me stories of the faith and love of my grandmother's mother, who had the audacity to divorce her husband even in an era before divorce was common. My mother told me of the deep faith of my great-grandmother, the encouragement that she was to my mom and the example that she was for our family, in spite of her issues with our great-grandpa. I have never forgotten those stories and remember both her and my grandmother for the faith that they exemplified. I wonder if this was how David felt as he tended sheep for his father, or when he sat in the presence of King Saul playing his harp. I wonder if he thought of the example that his great-grandmother had set in showing even the chosen people of Israel what a life dedicated to steadfast and unfailing love might look like. Do you have these kinds of examples in your life? Are there people who have gone before you, who have set the tone for what true faithfulness and love looked like, especially in following Jesus? When was the last time that you told that person's story? Ruth's story is still around for us today because people dared to tell of the *khesed* demonstrated by a woman, who was widow, orphan, and foreigner all in one. Will you do the same?

Closing Prayer: Let us pray: God of unfailing love and hope, we ask you for wisdom and insight as we seek to exemplify the *khesed* of Ruth. Give us memories of this story as we walk out into the world and share your steadfast commitment to all people through Jesus Christ. May we always walk in your ways, loving our neighbors and even our enemies. In Jesus' name. Amen.