



Ruth

Week 1

Lori Lampert - 02/06/2022

If you are like me, it is hard to pass by a display in a shop that has gifts with individual names on them without looking for the names of my kids, grandchildren, and of course me. I'm not looking to buy, I just want to see if we are included.

Ornaments, thimbles, and those name cards that tell you the meaning behind each name according to where it originated. And that is another thing I like to do, understand the story behind a name.

For example, my daughter Emily Sarah. Emily means *striving* and Sarah means *princess*. But behind that gift card meaning is the deeper story. She was named for my great grandmother Emily and Ben's sister Sarah. Our oldest son Raymond Benjamin is named for Ben's grandfather Raymond and of course Ben. Zachary was named before he was born by Ben because well, Ben just loved that name, and Zak's middle name is Gerald, after my dad.

Names have meaning. And whether the meaning behind them is just the enjoyment the parents felt at first saying the name, or the history behind them, the truth still holds. Names have meaning.

The names of people and places in the book of Ruth come packed with meaning. Some biblical scholars believe this book is a parable and just about everything in this short, 85 verse book is pointing the readers to a truth far beyond a cursory understanding.

It is more than an interesting story of two women, Ruth and Naomi, which in a patriarchal society is unusual enough. It is telling a story of redemption. A word that appears in some form over 20 times in these 85 verses. It is telling a story of taking risks, loyalty, death, forced migration and chosen immigration, inclusion, and the way patriarchal religious rules can be changed.

But mostly, it is telling the story of God in a unique, subversive way that—remarkably—those who chose the books to be included in the Holy Bible allowed to stay. And—spoiler alert—you will learn that Jesus has in his lineage, Ruth. Jesus is the descendant of mixed race ancestry. Jesus' own genealogy, found in the gospel of Matthew, is a theological statement of his lineage that includes the nations, the enemies of Israel, the excluded ones.

If we never read a word, and I just told you the Hebrew meaning of some of the names in the book of Ruth, you would have a good idea about the story. Ruth means *friend*. Naomi means *pleasant*, but as the story unfolds she asks that her name be changed to Mara, which means *bitter*. Naomi's two sons have names that mean *disease* and *perish*—a pretty clear indication of their future. Boaz means *strength is within him*.

Bethlehem, the city where the story begins and ends means *house of bread*. The region Moab doesn't have a Hebrew meaning for the name, east of Israel contained a land and a people despised by Israel. And yet, even its lack of a Hebrew meaning is a part of the story.

Friend, pleasant, bitter, disease, perish, strength. Everything in this remarkable story comes laden with meaning. And if this is a parable, as some scholars have told us, we need to watch for the way in which this story will call into question our first reactions, our initial assumptions. For the Holy Spirit has a wonderful way of teaching us a deeper understanding of who God is and for who we, who share the name Christian, are called to be.

Stay with me, but have you ever seen a James Bond movie? I began watching them when I worked at the Druid Theatre in Tuscaloosa, and the Paul McCartney theme for “Live and let die” became etched in my mind forever.

If you have, you know you don't want to arrive late. These action-packed movies begin with an incredible opening sequence you don't want to miss. Before the rest of the story unfolds, James will escape down a ski slope, off an airplane, through a city, dodging bombs and guns and sometimes all in the same movie. And only then will the movie theme song and credits begin.

The book of Ruth contains within its opening sequence an incredibly action-packed beginning to the story. It sets the context for all that will follow, and because it does, today we are going to look closely at what transpires in these first few verses. Only 5 verses, but if read too quickly we can miss the meaning they hold for the rest of this story of redemption.

¹⁻⁵ Once upon a time—it was back in the days when judges led Israel—there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man's name was Elimelech; his wife's name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion—all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there.

Elimelech died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband.

Setting the story at the time of judges lets the reader know there were not yet kings over Israel. Bethlehem, the house of bread, has no bread. Elimelech does what millions of people still have to do today when starvation is imminent and their homeland is no longer safe. He makes the journey to another country where he believes there is hope, food, and a place for his children to grow up.

It's hard for us to understand this type of safe passage, for even though they were heading into a hostile enemy land, they walked in. There were no immigration regulations, there were no border guards or fences, no one checking their passports. And, even though the people of Israel despised the people of Moab, Elimelech's family is able to move right in and be accepted by these enemies.

One would have assumed they would be shunned. One would assume they would live isolated lives and stay away from the Moabites. One would think they would have to beg for their food, to line up at the bread line. But this doesn't happen. The Moabites move over and let the Israelites move in.

Hospitality, kindness are not exclusive virtues of God's people. They exist everywhere, but we so often have labeled people as our enemy, as undesirable, and then excluded ourselves from their company. We have missed the opportunity to form genuine relationships. We label them "other." How will the world heal unless we too take a lesson from those we label "other" and simply spend time together?

And then—as if a famine and leaving one's home isn't enough—Naomi's world begins to crumble with the death of her husband.

In a patriarchal society a woman's value is determined by the men in her life. Being married meant security and resources. It meant acceptance into society and the important goal of producing male heirs to carry on the name and the property belonging to the husband. At least then when Elimelech dies Naomi's two sons will care for her. But remember, their names mean *disease* and *perish*. Although they marry Orpha and Ruth, they too die. And in those ten years while they were married, neither one of Naomi's daughters-in-law became pregnant.

Cue the opening credits and theme song. So much has happened in 5 verses. None of it good. Famine caused a family to leave their homeland. Three men died. Three women are left widowed and barren. This is the parable the Holy Spirit has preserved for us through the ages?

But remember. Parables are meant to challenge our assumptions. And although probably written over 500 years before Jesus was born, you will find his parables do the same thing. Jesus tells of the landowner who pays everyone the same regardless of the time they came to work. The Shepherd who leaves the 99 in search of the one. The one person who renders aid to the man beaten and left for dead is a despised Samaritan.

It is easy to assume in this story that these women are now lost and would be left to the mercy of others. They no longer have purpose, since they are no longer attached to a man and have no male heirs. They are insignificant in the culture and time in which they live, and frankly in many instances for the time and culture in which we live.

Yet, this is the power of Holy scripture, it reads us. It sees us as we are and reveals to us our own prejudices, our sin, our need for redemption. It tells us who we are and shows us the mercy and grace of God.

It's easy to assume we are going to read this book and find the call is to become Ruth, the friend. After all, the book is named for her, right? So she is the hero? But the reality is that we are going to see ourselves most clearly in Naomi. The one who moves from pleasant to bitter. And, like her, we are in need of redemption that comes from God, the true hero in this small book.

For the next few weeks I am going to ask that you hold an open Bible and read Ruth with me at least once during the week. Open it on your phone, youversion is a free app I use. Another I use is BibleGateway so I can read lots of versions of scripture with a click. If you don't have access to a bible, please let me know and I will be sure to get one in your hands.

I want to invite you to join Jiim Millsap in our Sunday morning class either in-person or online, as they go even deeper into understanding Ruth. We have childcare available at the church and if you prefer online, let us know so we can send you the link.

This small, 85 verse book deserves our attention. In a world where we assume walls and fences are supposed to be built, this book offers a way of living where they are taken down. In a world where we assume we know who is in and who is out of God's kingdom, this book will challenge our perspective. In a world where voices are stilled and quieted because of gender, religion, culture, I believe this book lifts up the voices of the marginalized until they cannot be ignored by those of us who are named Christian, and our assumptions are proved to be wrong.

Let's begin to set a big table today. In your home, or in the church, imagine there are no walls or fences. All are invited to come and be seated. Surely not the one who would doubt, but there is Thomas. Surely not the betrayer, but there is Judas. Well I would assume the denier Peter wouldn't be welcome, but there he is. This is the table of Jesus Christ. All are welcome. It is how he transforms the world.