

Pentecost 3

June 26, 2022

Ruth 1:1-8, 15-18, 22

Pastor Ann Hultquist

Have you ever been to a summer church camp? I know not everyone has, but many of our kids, youth, and families have spent time at camp, and especially Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp, which is in the Sangre de Cristo mountains west of Canon City. It is a special place and a place that has helped deepen the faith of many people of so many different ages. This past week I had the joy of spending time there with some of our elementary age Augustana kids--actually, mostly with the soon to be 2nd graders--so picture yourself for a minute at 7 or 8 years old.

What were you like; do you remember? Here are the adjectives I'd use to describe them: inquisitive, honest, enthusiastic, and reflective. For the youngest ones, the Bible study themes are all about God's love--and the question the camp counselor asked was "What is a gift that God has given you?" The answers around the circle were what you might expect: I'm kind, I'm good at music, I'm athletic; and then one boy, Ben, said "I don't have any gifts."

Without skipping a beat, the boy sitting next to him said "Yes you do, you're good at being my best friend."(!) As we walked a little later, I asked the two how long they'd been friends. "Oh, a really long time," they said. "Since we were two years old!" Kinda funny, but when you think about it, it's almost their whole lives, isn't it?

Friendship, loyalty, shared faith, love--those are all the themes we find this morning in the book of Ruth. It's not a story we hear often in worship; it might even be the first time you've heard any verses from it, except if you're a little older--then, you might remember that a few of the verses we heard this morning were *very* popular for weddings: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people; your God, my God..." Nice words, we might think, for one of the happiest of times. Only they are spoken in the book of Ruth at the absolute *worst* of times.

Ruth is a gritty, down-to-earth story. Have you ever had one of those years where nothing goes right? Or maybe *several* years where nothing goes right? That's how Ruth begins (and how our reading begins this morning)--a famine drives a man, his wife and sons from Israel to the foreign and very non-Jewish country of Moab. His sons marry local women--and then tragedy strikes: he dies, and both the sons die, leaving Naomi and her daughter-in-laws Ruth and Orpah alone.

As you've probably heard before, to be a woman in the Biblical world without a husband or sons was to be extremely vulnerable and without security. You were nothing--couldn't run out and get a job; there was no one to support you or make sure you had food or a place to live.

Orpah decides that the only way forward is to go back home to Moab. But Ruth makes a *choice*, of her own free will and agency, to do something--using everything she's got--to steer her life and Naomi's life in the right direction. She takes a huge risk and sticks with Naomi, with a willingness to leave all that's familiar and join her in a place she's never been: Bethlehem. "Your people will be my people, your God my God..."

I don't know about you, but I think I can count on one hand the people in my life today who might show me that kind of love and loyalty... You're thinking now, aren't you? Depending on your life circumstance, there may be several people or just one, or maybe no one you can think of. What about the reverse? Who in your life would you hang onto, stand by and love steadfastly? It might be something we have a hard time wrapping our heads around this morning, and that's ok, because the story of Ruth is not meant to get us focused on our own steadfastness, but on God's.

The Hebrew word that is used throughout the Old Testament for God's love is *hesed*--it actually means more than just *love*--it's the fundamental character of who God is: God's unwavering stick-to-it-iveness and care for Creation and for people, never giving up on us even when we turn away, go our own way, or just wander away. It is the faithfulness of God to us in every circumstance, every difficulty, every joy, every moment.

Here's the interesting thing: if you read the book of Ruth (it's only 4 chapters), you might notice something curious: God doesn't speak in the whole book. Seriously. Doesn't speak as in "Thus says the Lord," to us as readers; doesn't speak directly to any of the people. And yet God is present in the *hesed*--the love that is received from God and then lived out in Naomi and Ruth and others. Does that sound familiar? It's kind of like what we experience, isn't it? I mean, if you've had God speak directly to you, that's wonderful--but for most of us, we live out faith day by day, and experience the love, guidance, and stick-to-it-iveness of God through--what?--through other people: through grace, and forgiveness and friendship.

And we also know it through this weekly reminder of a community, gathered to praise and experience the good news of God in Christ and share this simple meal hosted by Christ. Jesus is the embodiment of *hesed* for the world, for *all* people--Jesus' steadfast love embraces us, doesn't let go of us, and invites us to live what we have received.

There's a surprise at the end of the book of Ruth--a surprise ending that really leads to a beginning. Because Ruth has a baby; and she eventually becomes a great-grandmother to a boy named David---and centuries later another baby will be born in that same family, born in a stable in Ruth's adopted hometown of Bethlehem. All because God's *hesed* grasped Ruth and the whole world.

"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God's mercies never come to an end. Great is Your faithfulness." *Lamentations 3:21-23*