

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
**Commentary by Michael Sigler**  
**August 14, 2011**

**Choosing a Community**

Ruth 1:8-18

**Key verse: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16).**

Kay Brooks shared the following experience: “Shortly after my miscarriage, I met up with a friend I hadn’t seen for several weeks. She pulled me into her arms and whispered, ‘I’m so sorry about...’ and didn’t finish, afraid to say the wrong thing. After a moment, I released my hold, but Marge didn’t. She kept on hugging. I squeezed back, but again finished before she did. I hugged again, stopping only after Marge released.

“When I stepped back, I realized she’d shown me more than love for the moment. She’d shown me she’d hang on to me, longer than I would admit I needed her” (from *Today’s Christian Woman*).

Kay’s experience with her friend reminds me of the “won’t let go” friendship shown by Ruth to Naomi. To escape famine, Naomi had moved with her husband and their two sons to Moab. The sons both married women from Moab, and one of those women was Ruth.

Eventually, Naomi’s husband and both sons died. In order to have the help of her extended family, Naomi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem. Both daughter-in-laws traveled with Naomi part of the way. But at some point, Naomi told them they should return to Moab, where they would be more likely to find husbands.

It was at this point that Ruth spoke these words of “won’t let go” friendship and love: “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” (Ruth 1:15-16).

Ruth’s words speak eloquently about the kind of committed love we ought to have in marriage. In fact, these words are often read at weddings for that reason.

Ruth’s words also speak to the kind of love and friendship we ought to have for one another in our churches. Jesus said: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:12-13).

Ruth's words speak eloquently about love and friendship in marriage, in family, and in the church. But they speak also about the kind of relationships that Christians should offer to people outside the church. Remember that Naomi and Ruth had a friendship that crossed cultural and religious barriers....

Someone has said: "People today do not come to church looking for friendliness; they come looking for friends." I have never been in a church whose people did not consider their church to be friendly. But too often our idea of friendliness really means being friendly with our longtime friends in church! We are so comfortable with each other that new people find it hard, if not impossible, to become part of our friendship circles.

Yet, authentic friendship is what people outside the church so often need and want. In 1985, the average American had 3 people in whom to confide matters that were important to them. By 2004, that number dropped to 2. Perhaps even more striking, the number of Americans with "no close friends" rose from 10 percent in 1985 to 27 percent in 2004 (reported in *USA Today*, 6-23-06).

Of course, Christians understand that, ultimately, un-churched people need to know Jesus Christ as their best friend. But that may never happen unless they first experience authentic friendships with Christian people. Ken Travilla notes that, when people first come to our churches: "Meeting the emotional needs of people comes first. They want to know 'Do you like me?' and 'Can I find a place here?'"

Robert Schnase reminds us: "In most communities, 40 to 60 percent of people have no church relationship. A majority of our neighbors on the streets where we live do not know the name of a pastor to call when they face an unexpected grief. Most of our co-workers have a few close friends and a circle of acquaintances, but do not know the sustaining grace that a church offers. Most of the families with whom we travel to our children's soccer tournaments and band concerts, most of the fine students we meet from the university, and most of the people who repair our cars and serve us in restaurants do not have a forum where they learn about the essentials of peace, justice, genuine repentance, forgiveness, love, and unmerited grace.

"Most of those who crowd the malls where we shop, attend the ballgames we enjoy, and sit behind us at movies and concerts do not know what it's like to join their voices with others in song and how this lifts the spirit in ways beyond words. Most of those who share our benches at bus stops, who sit across from us in waiting rooms, who take their children to the school down the block from us do not have a community that prompts them to service, to take risks for others, and to practice generosity."

If this is true, why are churches not doing more to share Christian love and friendship with the people beyond our church walls? Schnase says: "Church members love each other so much that their lives are so intertwined and their

interests so interwoven that church groups become impenetrable to new people. Closeness closes out new people who feel like outsiders looking in, and those on the inside don't even notice. Church members feel content because their own needs are met" (from *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* by Robert Schnase).

Ruth's eloquent words of love and friendship inspire me to seek authentic relationships with my family and with my friends at church. But when I consider the cross-cultural dimension of Ruth's friendship with Naomi, I am challenged to move beyond my personal comfort zone in order to make friends for Christ with those who don't yet know Him! And I want my church to be a place where un-churched folks can experience the kind of love and hospitality that will, ultimately, lead them to say: "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

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