

August 11, 2019
Lesson 11: A Mother-Daughter Covenant
Scripture: Ruth 1: 1-18

Context:

The lesson for the next two weeks focuses on the story of Ruth. In the book of Ruth, we learn about ancient Israelite understandings of marriage and family ties in relationship to covenant. It is a great story that has been romanticized and is one of the few stories of the Bible with females as the main protagonists.

There are several stylistic dynamics that are remarkable. The first is that the book is primarily furthered by dialogue, which accounts for two-thirds of the story.¹ This is more than any other book in the Old Testament. The second major point is that this book is about two women: Naomi the Israelite widow, returning to Bethlehem from Moab with her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, also a widow.² Together, they are the ones that give flesh to the story about their own survival.

The author is not known. Jewish tradition attributes authorship to Samuel, but modern scholars are divided over the date of the book, ranging from some time between the tenth to the fourth centuries BCE.³ Clearly the way the narrative plays out indicates that it was written some time after the events it narrates.

When it comes to the purpose of the book, there is not a particular reason revealed. There are some people who point to the genealogical aspect of the book for why it is in scripture. Genealogies in the Bible make Ruth the great-great grandmother of King David, giving the king a mixed ancestry.⁴ This would have been scandalous considering the fact that the Moabites were frequent enemies of the Israelites and ties to such a group of people would have been embarrassing for the king.⁵ To be connected to a Moabite would have been disgraceful considering their ties to other gods.

Yet this story redeems the notion of all Moabites as scandalous and deceitful. Presenting Ruth as a model proselyte and making Naomi the surrogate mother of David's ancestor mitigates the scandal.⁶ These two women redeem the narrative and show that covenant can extend to all sorts of people. David descends from a respective line of women, one of whom leaves her own people to become a part of God's people. She makes the covenant and abides by it.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 228.

² *Ibid.*, 228.

³ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

Application

The words of Ruth that we read today are most often heard of in the church when it comes to weddings. Many brides and grooms read the deep vows that Ruth makes and see that as part of their marriage covenant. The words are some of the most beautiful for a covenant made between two people and it is certainly easy to understand why this would be a desired passage for two people making a lifelong commitment to one another.

What is remarkable though is that this is a covenant made between a woman to her mother-in-law, who is technically no longer her blood as her ties has been severed through her husband's death. Yet for some reason Ruth is moved to make this covenant with Naomi and will even leave her homeland to do so. What a beautiful example of commitment and dedication on her part.

Ruth's devout nature and words make me think about the covenants that I have made or watched other people make. These can be powerful moments whether it is a couple at the church altar for holy matrimony, parents having their child be baptized, or the ordinands standing before a denominational body before being ordained. The language in these services is usually beautiful and well crafted.

Yet what I know is that the hard work of covenant comes after these moments. For the couple it comes to dealing with hard topics like money and how to support each other when the going gets tough. For the parents, it comes to the times they have to make the decision about how much they will allow the child to dictate their schedule when it comes to serving in the church or the ball team. For the ordinands, it comes when things start getting tough in their denomination or they are told they are moving.

These are the moments when we see that covenants are not just about pretty words and everyone having some type of a spiritual high. This is where the hard work of covenant begins. To say the words that come with covenant are quite different than following through in those words.

Yet if the story of Ruth teaches us anything, it is that those living into these covenants can be beautiful and we receive glimpses of God at work in our lives even in the confusing and messy times. Ruth had no clue what would happen in going with Naomi but she made the covenant and followed through. She made a covenant to follow Naomi and left everything she knew behind her.

It might be good for us to look at the covenants we have made and revisit them. If in a marriage, are we supporting our spouse in the times that are bad as well as the good? It is easy to take the pretty family picture, but it is another level of commitment to support our spouse in the difficult moments when things are less than picture perfect.

If we made a vow to raise our child to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, are we taking them to church and showing that we too understand the vows we made to serve Jesus as our Lord and Savior? And those of us who are church members are to support them by volunteering to teach Sunday school or even teach and assist the parents who are trying to figure out how to do it all. There was a vow made by multiple parties in that means of grace and we would do well to support one another.

And for all of those in the church, do we fulfill our covenants to each other? For clergy that means being loyal to the United Methodist Church and not joining other covenants. It means going where you are sent and not panning out for the next appointment. For laity that means supporting clergy by helping them to fulfill their

commitment to the church and also supporting in whatever ways possible to help their pastor lead. It means we put our trust in God and not allow our anxiety to drive us to make rash decisions or to lose sight of our calling.

Look at the words of Ruth and remember that covenant is a beautiful thing. We are reminded in Ruth's story that out of covenant amazing things can happen. Things can happen like a young Moabite widowed woman becoming the grandmother of an earthly king and then the grandmother of the King of Kings, the Lord of all. And it all began with her making a covenant of steadfastness and devotion.

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