

BaptistWay: Ruth, finding love after loss

June 20, 2013

- *The BaptistWay lesson for July 7 focuses on Ruth 1:1-19; 3:6-13; 4:13-17.*

One word sums up the entire book of Ruth: the word *chesed*. It is pronounced with a hard “k” not like the “ch” in “church.” The word is difficult to translate; thus, translations differ in how they render it: “lovingkindness,” “love,” “steadfast love,” etc. But my favorite translation is “covenant love.”

Chesed is love within the bonds of covenant. But it is even more than that. It is love that goes beyond the call of duty to help another. When God shows us *chesed*, we experience unmerited mercy and grace. When people show one another *chesed*, we see love in meritorious action.

A famine in Bethlehem

The story begins with a famine in Bethlehem. Because of this, Elimelek decided to move his family—Naomi, Mahlon and Kilion—to Moab where there was food. During their stay in Moab, both Mahlon and Kilion married Moabite wives—Ruth and Orpah (1:1-4).

After some time in Moab, Elimelech died (v. 4), leaving Naomi a widow. Ten years later, both Mahlon and Kilion died, and Ruth and Orpah joined Naomi in widowhood (vv. 4-5). Knowing she more likely would find aid among her own people, Naomi decided to go back to Bethlehem. She told her two daughters-in-law to do what was best for them—return to their mothers’ houses. Since they are young, they can remarry and find a future (1:6-9).

Initially, both daughters-in-law refused (v. 10), which speaks highly of

Naomi that they would choose her over their own mothers. Eventually, after some convincing, Orpah returned, but Ruth, in her famous speech (filled with *chesed*), refused to abandon Naomi (1:11-18). The two widows returned to Bethlehem, where the women welcomed them (1:19). Naomi told them to call her Mara (“bitter”) because Shaddai had dealt bitterly with her (1:20).

Gleaning in the fields

Ruth quickly volunteered to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. This is *chesed* in action. Not only did Ruth leave her homeland and renounce her gods to be with Naomi, she also took upon herself the role of a gleaner. Gleaning was for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the foreigner (Leviticus 23:22). It was a role for the desperate people in society, and Ruth, an unmarried woman and foreigner, took great risks becoming a gleaner (Ruth 2:1-2).

Providentially, Ruth gleaned in the field of Boaz, a relative of Naomi. Boaz took note of Ruth, and exhibited his own *chesed* by extending her multiple kindnesses as she gleaned (2:3-16). When Ruth returned to Naomi, Naomi was shocked at the amount of grain Ruth procured (2:17). “Whose field did you glean in?” she asks. “Boaz’s,” Ruth responds. “Ah! He is our kinsman redeemer!” (2:18-20).

Kinsman redeemer

A kinsman redeemer played several roles in Israel. His main role was to be the blood avenger in the case of murder (Numbers 35:12). But he was also expected to buy back land for impoverished relatives (Leviticus 25:25). In the book of Ruth, an additional requirement was placed on the kinsman redeemer—Levirate marriage. According to Deuteronomy 25:5-10, if a man died leaving his wife a widow, his brother was to take the widow as wife and any sons she produced were considered the dead man’s progeny. The

purpose was to protect the dead man's lineage and land.

Naomi instructed Ruth to go to the threshing floor at night to gain Boaz's agreement to be the kinsman redeemer. Much has been made of what happened at the threshing floor that night. Naomi told Ruth to bathe, to anoint herself with perfume, to wear her best (perhaps her wedding) clothes and go to where Boaz was sleeping (3:1-5). Most translations say Ruth was to "uncover Boaz's feet" and then do whatever he said. "Feet" is sometimes a euphemism for genitals in the Old Testament (Judges 3:24; 1 Samuel 24:3; 2 Samuel 11:8; Isaiah 6:2). So, many interpreters suggest Ruth uncovered Boaz's genitals as an invitation for sex.

This is one possible interpretation, but at least one interpreter suggests the Hebrew may be translated in a different way: Ruth "uncovered herself at Boaz's feet." While this might sound equally risqué, in actuality, it makes better sense of the text. As a petitioner, Ruth would have approached Boaz with her head covered and bowed down at his literal feet.

When Boaz awoke, she asked him to put his covering over her as a symbol that he would perform the role of kinsman redeemer (3:9). There is no suggestion in the text that Boaz and Ruth had sex on the threshing floor, although Ruth did spend the night at Boaz's feet. Rather, the exchange between them can be seen as a petitioner to a redeemer (3:6-13).

Exchange at the city gate

Boaz of course agreed but had to secure permission to marry Ruth from a closer relative (3:12). After an interesting exchange at the city gate, during which the nearer relative eventually refused to redeem Naomi's land (4:1-6), Boaz and Ruth marry (4:13). Later, Ruth gave birth to Obed, and the women told Naomi that Ruth was better than seven sons (4:14). Interestingly, they say, "A son has been born to Naomi!" thus fulfilling Levirate marriage in a most unusual way (4:16-17).

Ruth is more than just a love story. It is a story of grief and restoration, exile and return. Most of us will suffer loss in our lifetimes, whether it is the loss of a spouse or a family member or a job or a house. And all of us will grieve in different ways. There is, of course, no “right” way to grieve.

I find it interesting how Naomi, Ruth and Boaz each respond to loss in different ways. Naomi, who lost more than anyone (her husband and her two sons), responded with bitterness. She cried out against Shaddai, claiming Shaddai had dealt bitterly with her. She asked to be called Mara. She barely noticed Ruth’s lavish expressions of loyalty. Even at the end of the book, well-wishers told her to be happy, and we never really know if she was. Naomi’s response to loss was bitterness.

Some might condemn her for this. But I don’t. She lost her husband, and she lost her two sons. She was deeply wounded. Bitterness is one way to respond to grief. Of course, I hope she found solace in Obed and in the future Ruth and Boaz provided her. But Naomi’s bitterness was real and raw. I think many of us can relate to her expression of grief.

Responding to grief with action

Ruth, on the other hand, responded to grief with action. She lost her husband. Surely she bore deep grief as well. But she focused on helping Naomi. She dealt with her grief by throwing herself into the work of doing good for another. This is another legitimate way to express grief. Instead of allowing Naomi to wallow in despair, Ruth decided to do what needed to be done. She took charge; she risked her life; and she found a way forward. Perhaps this was how Ruth discovered healing for her own grief: by making the life of another person better.

We don’t know much about Boaz’s former life before he met Ruth. He was an older man (Ruth 3:10). Perhaps he was a widower. Regardless, he saw the need of two women who had experienced loss and extreme poverty and

he chose to express *chesed* to them. Selflessly, he invited both Ruth and Naomi into his life; bought back Naomi's land at his own expense; married Ruth, a Moabite, without concern for his own reputation; and fathered a son who legally would be considered Mahlon's. He went above and beyond the call of duty to turn the grief of others into celebration.

The book of Ruth is about *chesed*, love that goes beyond the call of duty. How can we express *chesed* to the people around us who have suffered loss?