

“The Gospel in Miniature”

by Rev. Dr. Paul Miller
Waterloo Presbytery Support Minister

Guest worship leader at Elora-Bethany

Ruth 2:1-13

November 1, 2015

Nestled between the great mountain peaks of Old Testament books like Judges and Samuel is a delicate little flower called the Book of Ruth. Surrounded on all sides by tales of kings and battles, the clash of empires, the rise and fall of nations, is the simple story of a poor young widow and her mother-in-law.

If you were here last week, you heard the opening of the story of Ruth. If you weren't, or to refresh your memories, it goes like this. A man from the village of Bethlehem in Judah (didn't a lot happen in Bethlehem?) packed up his family and moved to the land of the Moabites on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. Famine was raging in Judah and, like countless refugees throughout history, this man -- Elimelech by name -- went in search of a better life for his family -- his wife Naomi, and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion.

Like many migrants today, Elimelech stayed in Moab. He put down roots. His sons married Moabite girls. Life was good.

But then Elimelech died. Not long after both Mahlon and Kilion died. This happy family was reduced to three destitute widows -- Naomi, and her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth.

There was no one more vulnerable in biblical times than a woman on her own, without a man to provide for her and protect her. Naomi knew what she needed to do. She needed to return to Judah, to her own family who would take her in and support her. And she told her daughters-in-law that they needed to do the same.

But, astonishingly, Orpah and Ruth refused. “We want to stay with you,” they said -- refuting all mother-in-law jokes. The bond between them was so great that they were prepared to risk everything to stay together.

Eventually, Orpah saw good sense. She went back home to her own father and brothers. But Ruth was adamant. “Be reasonable, Ruth,” Naomi pleaded with her, “I'm flattered that you feel that way about me, but you have to think of your own interests, your own life. You're young enough to start over again if you go. But if you stay, what will become of you?”

Maybe you've been there - trying to reason with a family member you think is making a big, big mistake. Their intentions are honorable, their desires are noble, but you know what they want to do is just plain nuts. That's how Naomi must have felt.

But Ruth would have none of it. “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

17 Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.” (I think the old King James Version brings out

the beauty of Ruth's words the best.)

It's hard for us to appreciate the enormous risk Ruth was taking here. Women on their own were often reduced to begging or pressed into prostitution just to survive. They were exposed to exploitation and danger. And yet that was Ruth's steadfast choice. Her fidelity, her faithfulness to Naomi was unshakable.

We read more of the story today. Here's what we've heard, and how it ends.

Naomi and Ruth traveled to Bethlehem. Naomi was able to find Ruth a protector – one of her husband's relatives named Boaz. Boaz was well to do. He let Ruth glean for food in his fields. He took her under his wing. Over time, one thing led to another. Boaz fell in love with Ruth and they were married. And what began as a story of grief and loss ends in happiness. Ruth has a son. No one is more overjoyed than Naomi.

It's a charming tale. But at the very end of the book we discover its deeper significance. Ruth's baby was named Obed and the text tells us that "Obed became the father of Jesse" and "Jesse became the father of David." Ahh, that explains why this book is in the Bible. Ruth, it turns out, is the great grandmother of David, the greatest King ever to reign over Israel, the pattern for the Messiah, and the ancestor of Jesus.

Much of the Bible is set on the stage of world history. Israel was a small nation caught up in the politics of great empires. The stories of the Bible are written against the backdrop of world events. And the hand of God is in those events. "Dominion belongs to the Lord," it says in the Book of Psalms, "God rules over the nations." Israel's God was no local tribal deity but the one who held the destiny of the whole world in his hands. In fact, God is ruler over all creation. "The heavens are yours, and the earth is yours, the world and all that is in it, for you founded them." (Psalm 89:11) This is the Big Picture perspective we find in the Scriptures.

And yet, it's amazing how often the pivotal turning points in the biblical story are in very small events – local, personal, private, even intimate events. Three visitors showing up at Abraham's tent in the desert. Joseph involved in a spat with his brothers. Moses tending his father-in-law's sheep. Mary alone in her room in Nazareth. A baby born in a stable.

Small, everyday events, so insignificant they almost go unnoticed – and yet critical – indispensable – to God's unfolding plan of redemption. Ruth is that kind of story. Out of a poor family's private struggle to survive comes the great King David.

The characters in these events have this in common. They have no control over what is happening to them. They are caught up in forces over which they have no influence. Elimelech went to Moab because the harvest failed. He had no choice. What power did he have over the rain and land? It was move or die. He was at the mercy of nature.

Ruth had no control over what happened to her. Her husband died. She was a woman in a patriarchal culture. What could she do to change her fortunes?

In each of these small turning points, the individual was powerless to affect the outcome. But, each of these powerless individuals was able to make a choice. They decided to do something – to say Yes. To say No. To remain faithful. To be kind. To be brave. To be committed. And it was through those choices made by simple, ordinary people, that God worked to change the story. Small events became the bearers of God's big plan.

What was Ruth thinking? This is insanity, going with Naomi to a foreign land. She owed Naomi nothing and she had no right to expect anything from Naomi. And yet that seemingly reckless act of devotion – voluntary not coerced – mirroring God's reckless devotion to us – that choice set in motion a chain of events that over the twists and turns of centuries, culminated in the birth of the Messiah, Jesus.

Hidden in the Book of Ruth is the truth of the God of Israel. Ruth was a Moabite, a foreigner. Moab was often the enemy of Israel. Many times they went to war. The prophets railed against the Moabites and foretold their destruction. And yet a poor wandering refugee woman from Moab turned out to be the key to the bigger story. God is the God who breaks down barriers, who welcomes the stranger and reconciles enemies.

Scholars believe that the Book of Ruth was put in the Bible to keep in check Israel's pride at being the chosen race. When you think you've handpicked by God, it has a way of going to your head. You can start to think you're superior to everyone else. You build walls to keep outsiders out and to protect your purity. We can find that impulse towards purity and separateness reflected in the Bible. That's why we need Ruth. Ruth is an alternate voice, a different message. When the Jews became too impressed with their own chosenness, the Scriptures reminded them: "Remember Ruth. King David himself was descended from an outsider."

We see in Ruth the character and commands of God being lived out. Faithfulness. Devotion. Love. Compassion. All the things that God commands. Ruth imitates God in her freely chosen devotion to Naomi. The law says "care for the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the sojourner." Boaz lives that out. God says "I will never leave you or forsake you." God makes the desert bloom and the poor rejoice. We see those words acted out in Ruth.

It's all there in this tiny little book – the Gospel in miniature.

What does it say to us? I was reflecting this week on the similarities between our situation and Ruth's. Now, it's not really the same. We're not destitute and abandoned, forced out of our homes. If we were from Syria, maybe. But not us.

But we do have this in common with Ruth. We feel like we're not in control, don't we? We feel like decisions are made and events are happening that we are powerless to control.

In St. Catharines, where I live, there's a gas war going on. Several gas stations on one street have been slashing their prices. It's caused chaos -- traffic jams and honking horns and frayed nerves and foul language as people line up around the corner to fill their cars.

I've heard that people are driving from as far away as Cambridge for a tank of gas.

One morning last week I paid 81.9 cents a litre. When I drove home at night, the price had gone up to 98.9. Seventeen cents difference in a few hours. Who is making these decisions? Who's in control of gas prices so that you can pay 20 percent more at night than you paid in the morning?

That's just one tiny example. Nameless, faceless forces on the other side of the world do things every single day that have an impact on our lives. And there's nothing we can do about it.

I know from my years in ministry that most churches feel today feel the same. No longer in control. Struggling with a sense of loss. Not knowing what to do. Not knowing what will happen to them. Changes are taking place around us that we are absolutely powerless to influence. We watch the churches we love decline and even disappear, we see our own children and grandchildren turning away from the faith that means so much to us, and we don't know what to do about it. What can we do to make people want to come to us rather than to the hockey rink or the golf course or the shopping mall?

And the hard truth is that there really isn't a lot we can do to turn back the tide of social change. Back in the 90s, I used to get mailings from an organization called "The People for Sunday Coalition" which tried to lobby governments to preserve a common rest day by restricting Sunday openings. Then one day there was a letter saying that they were admitting defeat and shutting the organization down. Keeping Sunday as a day of rest was a lost cause.

But maybe this is a good time to remind ourselves that it's never been any different. God's people have always felt powerless in the face of great world events. God's people have never called the shots. The best example is one we'll be reading again in a few short weeks – Luke chapter 2 which begins, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of the whole world." Now there was somebody with power. The Roman Emperor. Augustus was all powerful. His word was law. He was worshiped as a god. He was called "Son of God" and "Saviour." He was so powerful, that at the stroke of a pen, he could force a Jewish peasant family thousands of miles away to travel across the country to give their personal information to the agents of the state.

And yet the real power – the power to change the human heart, the power to change the world – was not revealed in Caesar's decree, but in a stable in Bethlehem, surrounded by animals and poor shepherds. Or later, on a hill outside Jerusalem where an innocent man willingly gave up his life on a cross.

The moments of revolutionary change in the Bible do not happen when God's people try to force the worlds of politics and economics and warfare to change. In fact, whenever they try to do that, God's people become corrupted and co-opted and devoured by the very things they are trying to influence.

No, those moments of revolutionary change happen when, in seemingly very small ways, people say Yes to God. The little boy Samuel in the temple – “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” Mary in her parents’ house in Nazareth – “Let it be to me according to your word.” Ruth – “Wherever you go, I will go. Your God will be my God.”

I am starting to believe that if we, as Christians, just try to beat back the changes in society that are affecting the church, they will exhaust us or break us. It’s already happening. We’re wearing ourselves out trying to figure out how in the world we can get the attention of today’s generation of selfish consumers. And we’re losing that battle. And really, we don’t want to win that battle, because we would have to lose our souls in the process.

But it’s not the battle we’re even meant to fight. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – and love our neighbor as ourselves. And doing that doesn’t depend on our circumstances or on the approval of the opinion polls. It’s what we are called to do, regardless of what is happening around us. The results are up to God.

So rather than running around looking for the magic bullet that will recreate the church many of us remember, the focus needs to change. Where are those opportunities to love God and love our neighbor? Where are those opportunities to practice faithfulness and devotion? Where are those places of hope in the midst of disappointment, joy in the midst of sorrow? Can we find them, embrace them, live into them fully?

Now, I’m not saying we should just pack it in and forget about the church. But we need to do what we are actually able to do. Why do we still read the Book of Ruth after 2500 years? It’s because we are compelled by the simple way she expressed faithfulness and love at a time of devastating loss.

I just heard something interesting. Someone I know attended a children’s ministry conference in Chicago. What she heard is that the style of worship that depends on the high octane worship band with the super-high tech light and video shows – church that looks like a rock concert – is going out of style. It’s not what today’s generation of younger people want. They want authenticity. They want relationships. They want to feel like they’re not being exploited as consumers, or the objects of someone’s selling job.

Maybe the answer is already among us. Maybe it’s not frantically looking for the right program or activity. Maybe it’s attending to the small things – the moments when we are fully present to each other in love and faithfulness – when we Christ enters us and we can show him to others. That’s what people will notice.

It’s always been the case. When God’s people are quietly, persistently faithful, miracles happen.