

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Tiffani Harris

Who is the hero?

Ruth

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When my friend's husband and son passed away, she made the hard decision to immigrate to America to protect her family. Before leaving, she sought advice from the pastor of her small Baptist church. He told her *"Do not worry. The church will help you."* After their long journey, she and her family waited on the Mexican side of the border. There, while waiting, someone told her *"When you get to America, no one will help you in America."*

But she clung to the words of her pastor *"The church will help you."* Once she finally crossed the border a volunteer at a shelter found her and took the family to Iglesia Bautista West Brownsville. There, our friends Pastor Carlos and Pastor George received them into their shelter. The Church ministered to her and her family. Knowing she was a perfect fit for the Naomi House, Pastor George called me

And it was the opening of the Naomi House and DaySpring's next step in extending hospitality.

The Bible is clear about God's heart for widows, orphans, and foreigners. They are addressed almost 90 times throughout the Old and New Testaments. God's people are instructed to care for the vulnerable as a demonstration of what it means to live out God's love and covenant.

These virtues take on flesh, in the book of Ruth. It is a quiet little book, positioned right after the book of Judges in the Old Testament. The book of Ruth begins like this: "In the days that the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land."

Now, the phrase "In the days that the judges ruled" is loaded! You only have to turn the page once to find out why. The last verse of Judges states: "In those days Israel had no king, and everyone did as they saw fit." It was a time of lawlessness and violence. It was chaotic and dangerous. There seemed to be very little reverence for God and little sign of God's presence in the world.

In this chaos, there was also a famine in Bethlehem (which ironically means "house of bread"). Naomi's family makes the difficult decision to flee and migrate to another country. I can't imagine what that conversation was like...

Come on kids! Pack the donkeys, we're going to . . . Moab!

I can imagine the teenage sons saying: What? Anywhere but Moab. *No one* wanted to go to Moab. It was a treacherous journey across the desert to a barren land. Worst of all Moab was a sworn enemy of Israel. Like many other Biblical families and many today across the world, they had to migrate to save their family.

While in Moab, Naomi's sons grow and marry, but then tragically, her husband passes away and then her sons do as well. Grief-stricken and in a foreign land, Naomi and her daughters-in-law risk falling into abject poverty. Once again, Naomi makes the difficult decision to migrate and go back home to Bethlehem. Releasing her Moabite daughters-in-law from their contractual obligations, she blesses them, urging them to go home to their mothers and build a new life. There is no shame in Orpah going home to her mother. Even though there had been a dowry contract, she was fully released and blessed. Naomi has no claim upon her.

Ruth, however, does the unexpected and insists on accompanying Naomi. She will not turn back and go home. She is a hero in this story and her commitment to Naomi and God is remarkable. In this commitment, Ruth promises, "Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God my God" I think a promise like this must have been in response to the years of love and fellowship and nurturing that she experienced with Naomi's family. Ruth the outsider, is choosing to follow God, a faith that would have been foreign to a Moabite. Together, Ruth and Naomi continue their journey to an uncertain future. Will they be received or shunned? Will they survive? Can they make a future in Bethlehem?

These are the same questions many ask today as they seek refuge in a new country. Naomi (which means pleasant) is grieving and empty when she arrives in Bethlehem. She changes her name saying, "*Call me Mara. I left full and God has brought me back empty.*" Mara means bitter. So in her grief and bitterness, she expresses her hurt and pain before God and the community, and they hold it with her.

Some have questioned Naomi's motives because of the way she helps Ruth find a husband in Boaz later in the story. But what if Naomi is also a hero?

Naomi demonstrates great virtue and loving character. She's poor and alone, and she takes on another mouth to feed on the long journey back to Bethlehem. She risks bringing a Moabite—an outsider-- back to her community, knowing that she will have to convince them to accept Ruth. She may have to find a way to provide for Ruth. In her grief and bitterness, Naomi introduces her widowed daughter-in-law to her community. Through all of this together, she and Ruth develop a restorative partnership.

It's a beautiful story. Don't be mistaken this isn't the Jane Austin love story we might want it to be. It is not Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett. Boaz and Ruth do not run to each other in the rain, or in a field of wildflowers and embrace in a romantic display of love at last united. It may not fit our modern sensibilities, but it is still a beautiful story of faithfulness.

When the world was lawless and chaotic, a small community in Bethlehem continued to follow God's ways. The people of God in Bethlehem demonstrate surprising *hesed* love towards these women. The community protects them, following God's commands in Deuteronomy to care for the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. The community lets them glean extra food from the fields. They work to help secure a future for Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth and Boaz marry, and Ruth has a baby named Obed. The entire community rejoices. Scripture says women surround Naomi and praise God with her that God has turned her bitterness into joy. There's singing, laughter, dancing, and thanksgiving. Then, Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of David who is in the lineage of Christ.

Hesed love is the common thread and may be the main hero in this story. *Hesed* is one of the Hebrew words for love. It is not the kind of love like "I love ice cream," nor is it a romantic love. It can be difficult to fully translate. *Hesed* means covenant faithfulness, completely undeserved kindness and generosity; an active love that intervenes. In the book of Ruth, some have described *hesed* to mean love that acts in solidarity.

Naomi asks God to bless Orpha and Ruth with *hesed* love. Ruth, Naomi, the people of God, and Boaz all demonstrate *hesed* love. Each of them takes significant risks, entering restorative partnerships together. In these partnerships, God re-stories their lives turning chaos into grace.

As Naomi saw that Ruth was determined and chose to walk with her, so we, too, have seen the determination of our neighbors seeking asylum, and we choose to walk alongside them. Naomi took Ruth back to her community. The community demonstrated covenant faithfulness to these women. Now you see why DaySpring's hospitality house is called Naomi's House.

The book of Ruth began in chaos, in a time when God seemed silent. We, too, may wonder where the presence of the Lord is in these days. Jacques Ellul, a French philosopher wrote at the end of the 20th century, that *God has been largely silent in the West – absent on a collective level.*

Now, in the 21st century, with famine in Sudan and Gaza, war in the Middle East and Ukraine, rampant violence and lawlessness in Central America, and extreme division in our own country, it can feel like that sometimes.

As in the time of the judges, when “everyone did as they saw fit,” the book of Ruth was a reminder that **God acts in the human *hesed*** – in the human display of love in action. This is a story focused on women and faithful love when women were rarely the main subject of a good story. Here, God is experienced, not in mighty kings or valiant battles, not in a parting of the sea or in judges or prophets. God is present here with ordinary people, in quiet acts of solidarity and love. God is present in the covenant faithfulness of a community who receives in hospitality two widows and sojourners. God is present turning bitterness into restored life, barrenness into fertility, emptiness into fullness. In this ancient work, God acts through the ordinary faithfulness of the community.

This is also true for us today. God can be found in the demonstration of faithful love in action with the marginalized right here among us. In fact, two separate women and their children are making their way to Waco right now. We will welcome them into the Naomi House on Monday evening. They both expressed overwhelming gratitude to us over the phone this week. They are amazed that the church would open its doors to them. Both are at the very end of their abilities and resources. One of them told us “I will not let you down. I need to be with other Christians.”

Love put into action, *hesed* love, faithfulness of this sort, comes with risk. Everyone in this story risked something in demonstrating *hesed* love. Ruth risked her future and gave up her home. Naomi risked not being able to provide for Ruth. Boaz risked his reputation. The community risked investing in people and sharing some of their resources.

So, what are the risks for us when we share faithful love in action? It may be time, convenience, or simplicity. We might be challenged to change or grow. We might have to learn new ways of being in the world, new perspectives, and new attitudes. The risk that the community in Bethlehem took, to welcome a foreigner in, to share life with her, eventually resulted in David, the future king who brought needed change to the country. In fact, the entire redemption story of Christ hinged on the people of Bethlehem receiving a foreigner and welcoming her in.

Sharing our lives with the marginalized can yield beautiful and regenerative partnerships that we may not even know we needed. Often our neighbors seeking asylum, bring with them a vibrant faith that has been tested in ways we cannot fathom. For all the talk of the decline of the North American church contrasted with the growth of the church in the Global South, maybe there is something we can learn. They may

just bring a faith to us that could re-energize the North American church if we will open ourselves in hospitality and *hesed* love.

For it is in these partnerships, that God **remakes** lives, families, and communities. We also get the privilege of seeing God at work in quiet and surprising and healing ways. When God's community demonstrates unfailing active love and faithfulness lives and communities are re-storied into God's narrative of grace.

May it be so for all of us.

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