

Ruth: The Problem of Grief

Ruth 1: 1-8,16-18

The book of Ruth is a love story that would make Danielle Steele blush. It's full of sex and seduction. It has dead ends and new beginnings. It deals with grief and explores commitment. It takes place during the period of Judges. You can read it in about 15 minutes. But before you dig in let me glean a lesson or two about life that is worth taking with you. The Book of Ruth teaches us that:

I. LIFE IS FILLED WITH DETOURS

DETOUR AHEAD-don't you hate that sign when you are traveling somewhere?

Detours cause anxiety.

Back in the days of the Judges, when chaos ruled the world, a famine in the land of Bethlehem caused a man named Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, along with their two sons, to migrate to Moab in hopes of finding food. Somebody told them to cheer up, things could be worse. So, they cheered up and sure enough things got worse for them when they got to the new land. Elimelech died. Then the two sons married two Moabite women against their religious heritage, one named Orpah and another named Ruth. Ten years later both Mahlon and Chilion died. Life is full of detours.

Never morning wears to evening but some heart breaks, a heart just as sensitive as yours or mine. What does one do with detours ahead? It's not a question of whether or not you have detours, it's what do you do with the detours of your life?

Maybe a country song by Carrie Underwood gives us a clue. She was on her way to Cincinnati to see her mom and dad on a cold, dark, winter night. She was driving too fast when the wheels started sliding with the baby in the back. That's when this traveler began to pray:

Jesus take the wheel, Take it from my hands. 'Cause I can't do this on my own, I'm letting go.

So, give me one more chance, to save me from this road I'm on, Jesus take the wheel.

I submit to you, that's a pretty good prayer. I know it's secular country music, but it's a pretty good prayer, Jesus, take the wheel. When life is confusing, when it's full of anxiety, when you are traveling a road that you have no idea where it's going to end, Jesus, take the wheel.

II. LIFE CONFRONTS US WITH DECISIONS.

Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. Things are better there. The rains have come, the famine has ended. So, she bids her daughters-in-law goodbye. Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye and returns to her family. But Ruth will have nothing to do with it. In Verse 17 we get the verse everybody knows from the Book of Ruth.

Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you, for where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God and where you are buried there, I will be buried as well.

Now let me set the record straight. That was spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. I know we don't usually make such radical commitments to our mother-in-law; we just tell jokes about them.

There is no joke here. It's a radical statement of loyalty and commitment. Ruth commits herself to Naomi, to a new religion, to a new life, to a radical, different way of living.

You are most likely to hear these words at a wedding. While the context has nothing to do with marriage, it has everything to do with commitment. We like that stuff of commitment even though it frightens us. Commitment

is an island of certainty in a sea of change. Commitment is a promise of presence in a world that is unpredictable. Commitment is a chance we take, a vow we make, because humans are not made to be butterflies fluttering here and there in search of the sweetest nectar.

Or, as is said of a horse and a jockey in that tender movie, Sea Biscuit, "You don't throw a whole life away just because it's banged up a bit." The world only functions on commitment. Where you go, I will go. We could use that kind of promise in families, in churches, among friends, and even among countries. Life is full of decisions. Caring people don't throw relationships away just because they struggle from time to time. We need to hang in there.

III. LIFE OFFERS NEW DIMENSIONS

The word "redemption" appears 23 times in this short story. It's not a word we use much anymore. I was at a convenient store up in Maine when I made the mistake of throwing a Coke bottle in the trash. The lady almost jumped over the counter to grab it out of the trash and said, "You don't understand, that's worth something up here; we have a bottle bill in this state." Bottles and cans are redeemable in Maine. Some of you redeem your frequent flyer miles for more trips. To redeem something is to buy it back, cash it in, set it free.

Now I need to tell something about this story because what makes this story really neat is that there is something else going on underneath the surface.

So, Ruth goes to glean grain in the fields of Boaz. Such practice was an ancient form of welfare. Boaz likes what he sees. There's a night on the threshing floor. There are some property rights to be dealt with. But eventually Boaz takes Ruth to be his wife. Together they have a son whom they name Obed. Obed is the grandfather of King David, from whose lineage Christ Himself is born. Woven in to this story of sexual innuendoes, strange customs, and men's rights, there is a principle of a kinsman-redeemer who gives us a forward glimpse of Christ our Redeemer.

No matter what's happened in your life, no matter the circumstances, no matter the grief, no matter the change, there is One who comes to buy it back, to redeem, to set us free. We believe that one is Jesus, the Christ.

New Life is costly-you are worth it. Detours can be deadly-so let Jesus take the wheel. Our responsibility is commitment. Are you willing to go with God all the way?