

A Parable of Chesed

Sermon for Pilgrim Church

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SCRIPTURE READING Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and

with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud.

¹⁰They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' ¹¹But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.' ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' ¹⁶But Ruth said,

'Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

—

I often begin a sermon with a catchy story, filled with rich detail, to draw us emotionally into the principles that scripture points us toward.

There's no reason for me to tell a story or paint a picture today, because our text is a story. A beautiful, poignant, detailed story of *chesed*. By seeing one group of human beings love each other, we see God's love, God's *chesed*, embodied. We see that *chesed* can cross human groups and borders, and we learn how to *chesed*. Indeed, one Biblical scholar calls the whole book of Ruth a parable of *chesed*.¹

Of course, to know what a parable of *chesed* is, we have to know what *chesed* is. *Chesed* is love. In Hebrew, and in the Hebrew Bible, *chesed* is often the way God's love is described - and God often calls the people to *chesed*.

Chesed cannot be translated with any one word. Love is a good start, but it's more than that. It means steadfast love. It means mercy. It means loving kindness. And in the Hebrew bible *chesed* means both the kind of love God gives freely to humanity, and the kind of love God calls humanity

¹ Working Preacher's Narrative Lectionary Podcast 2023

to practice. *Chesed* - that is to say mercy and steadfast love and charity and kindness - are God's gift to us and commission for us.

I had the honor of sitting with our neighbors at Temple Isaiah at their Shabbat service this week. I was there as an officer of our interfaith association, and hopefully as a friend, witnessing the grief of our Jewish siblings in this terrible time. And I was also there to learn, as I always do when at their services. Friday night I learned how often *chesed* (and related words) appears within the prayers of Shabbat.

BARUCH atah, Adonai Eloheinu
v'Elohei avoteinu v'imoteinu, Elohei
Avraham, Elohei Yitzchak v'Elohei Yaakov,
Elohei Sarah, Elohei Rivkah, Elohei
Rachel v'Elohei Leah. Ha-El hagadol
hagibor v'hanora, El elyon, gomeil
chasadim tovim, v'koneih hakol, v'zocheir
chasdei avot v'imahot, umeivi g'ulah
liv'nei v'neihem l'maan sh'mo b'ahavah.

*SHABBAT SHUVAH — Zochreinu l'chayim,
Melech chafeitz bachayim,
v'chotveinu b'sefer hachayim,
l'maancha Elohim chayim.

Melech ozeir umoshia umagen.
Baruch atah, Adonai,
magein Avraham v'ezrat Sarah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ, אֱלֹהֵי
אַבְרָהָם, אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב,
אֱלֹהֵי שָׂרָה, אֱלֹהֵי רִבְקָה, אֱלֹהֵי
רָחֵל וְאֱלֹהֵי לֵאָה. הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל
הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא, אֵל עֲלִיוֹן, גּוֹמֵל
חַסְדִּים טוֹבִים וְקוֹנֵה הַכֹּל, וְזוֹכֵר
חַסְדֵי אֲבוֹת וְאִמּוֹת, וְמַבִּיא גְאֻלָּה
לְבָנֵי בְנֵיהֶם לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ בְּאַהֲבָה.

SHABBAT SHUVAH — זָכְרֵנוּ לְחַיִּים,

מֶלֶךְ חַפֵּץ בְּחַיִּים,
וְכֹתֵבנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים,
לְמַעַן אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים.

מֶלֶךְ עוֹזֵר וּמוֹשִׁיעַ וּמַגֵּן.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ,
מַגֵּן אַבְרָהָם וְעֲזַרְת שָׂרָה.

אבות ואמהות
גבורות
קדושה
קדושת היום
עבודה
הודאה
שלום
תפלת הלב

BLESSED ARE YOU, Adonai our God, God of our fathers and mothers,
God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,
God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah,
the great, mighty and awesome God, transcendent God
who bestows loving kindness, creates everything out of love,
remembers the love of our fathers and mothers,
and brings redemption to their children's children for the sake of the Divine Name.

*SHABBAT SHUVAH — Remember us for life, O Sovereign who delights in life,
and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, Living God.

Sovereign, Deliverer, Helper and Shield,
Blessed are You, Adonai, Sarah's Helper, Abraham's Shield.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ, מַגֵּן אַבְרָהָם וְעֲזַרְת שָׂרָה.
Baruch atah, Adonai, magein Avraham v'ezrat Sarah.

*SHABBAT SHUVAH: The Shabbat between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.
For those who choose: At the beginning and end of the blessing, one bends the knees and bows
from the waist at the word בָּרוּךְ Baruch and stands straight at the word יְיָ Adonai.

אבות ואמהות Avot v'imahot . . . As God has been gracious to our forebears, so may we receive
divine favor

I noted one in particular that is translated in part: “Blessed are you, Adonai our God...who bestows loving kindness, creates everything out of love, remembers the love of our fathers and mothers....”

The psalms say, “All of your paths, God, are full of love and faithfulness for those who keep your Covenant and Testimonies.” Love, steadfast love and faithfulness, in *chesed*: God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are given to us when we follow God’s ways. And *chesed* goes far beyond expectations.

Just as in our text two weeks ago, *chesed* saved the most vulnerable, and held together Egyptians and Israelites when the midwives and Pharaoh’s daughter saved the Hebrew babies, in Ruth, *chesed* holds Moabites and Israelites together, and saves two vulnerable women.

In Ruth, Naomi prays that God will act with *chesed* toward her beloved daughters in law. And then, Ruth herself acts with *chesed* toward Naomi - by clinging to her, staying with her, by showing steadfast love beyond expectations. And later in the story, Boaz - distant cousin of Naomi - lives out *chesed* by taking care of both of Ruth and Naomi.

I think that the way human beings act with *chesed* in the story of Ruth has to do with the beautiful and poignant ‘happy ending’ of the book. In other words, the moral of the story - the meaning of the parable - is a call to *chesed*.

Ruth clings to Naomi no matter what. She goes with Naomi.

She will show steadfast love and mercy and compassion and commitment to Naomi. And if this is a parable of human chesed, it is a parable of God's love, too. This is God's promise to us, as well -

"...that God will be with us, no matter what...This is how God acts. God clings to us, refusing to allow us to bear our despair and emptiness alone. In so doing, God shows us loving kindness that sows in us hope and fullness, in short, salvation." (Jessica Tate, *Between Text and Sermon*, Ruth 1:6-22, Interpretation)

To Naomi, widowed, having buried two sons (there's no word for a mother who buries her children), homeless, starving, God sent Ruth to embody chesed. Ruth could not magically reverse Naomi's tragedy – indeed Ruth's life was devastated, too. What Ruth could do was to pledge to be with Naomi, no matter what. Even though she could have found her own way out of this tragedy, she pledged to stay with Naomi.

It is no small thing that Ruth does, throwing her lot in with Naomi. She could have gone back to her family in Moab. Orpah did, and no one blamed her. But Ruth chose the unknown path, and clung to Naomi, whom she loved. Together, they could journey with courage.

God loves us, and God sends us people who live God's kind of love, chesed. The people who pledge to us that they will walk beside us on the road, whether it be through forest or desert, whether it be through despair or redemption, these are the people who carry us, until the tears are wiped away. These are the saints who bring us the message of hope, that we will

get through this life, together, and with God's grace. Chesed, it turns out, will get you through a lot.

In the book of Ruth, God is mentioned but God doesn't speak. There is no burning bush, no parted sea.

But God's true nature, is right there in the promise Ruth makes to Naomi.

Here is how the Book of Ruth closes:

“¹³ So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the LORD made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.’ ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

¹⁸ Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²²Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.”

And we who are Christians remember that Ruth and David are also part of Jesus' ancestry. Ruth, who embodied the human practice of God's way of love, is Jesus' own great great great great great great grandmother. And that part of the parable of chesed makes sense to me, because Jesus came to show us God's way of love, God's way of chesed.

In the letter of 1 John we hear:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

God is love. So, God's nature is right there in the promise Ruth makes to Naomi:

I will go with you.

You are not alone.

God sends Ruth to Naomi, and Ruth incarnates God's love.

From this parable of chesed, may we all learn to live God's love, God's steadfast love and faithfulness, compassion and mercy, for all people.

Amen.