

“There When You Need Us”

Text: Ruth 1: 1 – 18

Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 11/05/06

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts, be acceptable unto Thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

The book of Ruth... a weird and wonderful story. It is an unusual story in the Bible, if for no other reason then it is almost exclusively the story of women. The three men – Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion – are basically dead and buried by verse five. Their importance short-lived beyond the fact that they brought together Naomi and Ruth.

So what we have is the story of two widowed women – a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law. Their means of support was uncertain at best. They lived when women did not leave home to get a job, certainly before there was any such thing as life insurance. In other words, they lived in a time when to be a widow meant being destitute.

Their lives had been turned upside down. One woman was leaving to return to her homeland unsure of what it would be like after years of famine. The other was leaving her family, leaving her home, leaving all that was familiar to learn the ways of a new land.

Of course, there has been the other daughter-in-law – Chilion’s wife, Orpah. She, too, was loyal and said she would follow Naomi. But Naomi reasoned with her, and said that it was not the smart thing to do. Her only real means of support was to stay with her family until such time as she could marry again. So with a kiss, Orpah bid her mother-in-law goodbye.

And so we are left with these two – Naomi and Ruth – homeless widows on a journey to the unknown. Yet, even before they leave on their journey, we recognize that there is something exceptional to their story. What is so remarkable is the relationship they have with one another.

Here is where I believe language fails us. We really don't have an English word that captures the connection these two have with one another. So I think it is time this morning for us to learn a little Hebrew. Hebrew being the original written language for the story of Ruth. In Hebrew, the word used to describe this relationship is "hesed". Hesed expresses this remarkable combination of love, loyalty, and commitment that Ruth shows for Naomi. It is loyalty that exceeds legal requirement or duty. In the Hebrew Scriptures, hesed typically describes God's nature in covenant with Israel. But it's Ruth who proves to be the example and source of hesed in this story. Think of Ruth's wonderfully poetic words: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me."

In reflecting on this story Martin Copenhaver suggests that "hesed" is so much the truth of Ruth's relationship with Naomi that her decision to stay isn't even a conscious choice. It is just an extension of the bond they share. He writes: "Ruth's declaration that she will follow Naomi is so immediate, so unyielding, so matter-of-fact, so lacking in reflection, that we may begin to recognize that she doesn't see it as a choice at all. Staying with her mother-in-

law is simply the thing to do. She could always leave as Orpah did. But for Ruth, following Naomi is simply living out one of the givens of life.”

He goes on to suggest the importance of this is because it shows us a way of relating to one another that is reflective of the way God relates to God’s children. He states, “That is why the story of Ruth - a gentile - has an honored place in the Hebrew scriptures. She reminded the Jews of something important about their God. God does not leave when the going gets tough, when we are as destitute as an ancient Near Eastern widow. God is not committed to us because it is in God's interest, or for any other good reason. Rather, God is committed to us because...well, because that's the way God is.”¹

So now that I have re-introduced you to the story of Ruth...and what makes it so remarkable, I would like to challenge you to think of it as something more than a story for a bygone age. It is more than a story of the relationship between two down and out widows. It is more than an analogy of God’s relationship with Israel. It is a story about the relationships we can and do have with one another even today.

For the past five weeks, you have been reading over this year’s stewardship theme: “Here when you need us ... we need you”. It is an interesting theme because the first part is set up essentially as an assumption – “Here when you need us” – with the second part being the hope or expectation.

Let’s think on this for a moment. “Here when you need us...” That’s a pretty big assumption, isn’t it? A pretty bold claim. After all, that is not the message of a lot of life, is it? Oh sure, others may say so, but we all know what

¹ Copenhagen, Martin B., “The Only Thing to Do”, The Christian Century, October 19, 1994

they mean is quite different. So often we know their message is really “Here for you *if* you do your part”. “Here for you as long as you do your fair share.” “Here for you as long as you are of value to us.” But to sincerely say, we are here for you when you are truly *in need*...well, that’s rather unique.

I’d like to suggest that the assumption being made in stating the church is “here when you need us” is similar to the assumption Ruth makes in following Naomi. It is an assumption based on the same type of relationship - which basically says - within the nature of this relationship, no other choice really exists. You see, I believe the church – when we are really and fully being the church – is based on the same type of “hesed” relationship that Ruth and Naomi shared. Church community isn’t really about doing your fair share. It is about doing as much as you can, because there are those in any given moment who can’t and we want to be there for them when they need us. Church community isn’t about what value others bring to us. We know that we all have the same value as children of God. Church community *is* about being able to walk with others on their journey even when it takes us away from the comfort of what we know so well. Church community *is* about being this way not because we ought to, not because we are told to. It is about being this way because it is who we are. It is how we relate to one another.

Over the past few weeks as I have read the statements some of you have written about how the church has been there for you or what it means to have it as a part of your life. I have been deeply moved. I have found them both powerful and prayerful. Every one of them has said something special. There were two I

decided to pull out and not have included in the bulletin. I did so because I wanted you to hear them in the context of thinking about how we practice this type of relationship with one another. Let's listen to both of these:

“Since joining the church, I have suffered deep personal loss and if it were not for my association here in Church, I don't think I could have faced what had to be faced. I feel near to God in our church”

“Church for me was peace. At a time when I had a sad divorce. At a time when family was not what I had grown up with. When as a child it was a family of love and caring, but being an adult it was a family filled with jealousy and back stabbing and talking behind each others backs. Church became my one and only peace. My children and church became my peace. And it still is. I am thanks for that. Church was the place I came to find peace. You didn't have to do anything except open your door and let me sit inside on Sundays.”

My friends, that is “hesed” relationship. That is what God calls us to be as a Christian community. Do we always get it right? Of course not, we are as human as anyone else. But the more we practice it, there more it become our nature. The more it becomes who we are. Then we will find, when people need us, when people need our community, there will seem to be no other choice because that is how we relate to one another and to the world.

Amen.