

Scripture: Ruth 1: 1-14

1In 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.

Sermon: A Wish Prayer for First Hershey UMC: Charity, Truth, and Loving Kindness

Today we welcome the members of the Order of the Eastern Star. And we celebrate that you chose to attend the home church of your president, our own church member, Linda Watson. When Linda and I met to discuss the service, she shared with me your core beliefs are charity, truth, and loving kindness. All commendable actions that you all partake in. All memorable acts that are biblical too. In particular we find such acts in the story of Ruth and Naomi. And so today I want us to look at this story to be inspired and encouraged as I continue to reveal my wish prayer for this church of charity, truth, and loving kindness.

Here's the background to the lesson we heard today. The name Naomi means "sweet, pleasant," which gives us an idea of Naomi's basic character. She lived during the time of the judges. She was the wife of a man named Elimelech, and they lived in Bethlehem with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. When a famine hits Judea, Elimelech and Naomi and their two boys relocate to Moab. There Mahlon and Chilion marry two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth.

After about ten years, tragedy strikes. Elimelech dies, and both of Naomi's sons also die, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah widows. Which is not good, because there would be no men to protect them, or support them financially or emotionally. Naomi, hearing that the famine in Judea was over, decides to return home. You heard what followed as both Orpah and Ruth want to join her. Naomi protests saying, ***'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... it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.'***

What do you do when you can't control another person's will or actions? It's a well-known fact, we can't change another person, we can only change ourselves. But how do we push through that awkwardness when we are uncomfortable with what they have chosen to do? What I appreciate from this story is while we can't control another person, we can't change them, yet we can help them.

This is called charity. Now I know that word can get a bad rep, but I think that's because our society has redefined what charity is. We hear the word charity, and we think "oh, poor things who can't afford food or clothing" right? But that's not the Biblical definition of charity. Charity, in Christian thought is treating one another in a way you want to be treated. It's not condescending, rather it's putting yourself in another's shoes and discerning what would assist them the most. Regardless of age, gender, or beliefs. Another word for it could be mercy.

When Jesus is asked by a law expert what must be done to inherit eternal life, Jesus teaches the story of the Good Samaritan, how a man was hurt and left for dead on the road and a priest and law maker both passed him by, but the Samaritan saved him. At the end of the story, Jesus asks this, ³⁶ ***"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"*** ³⁷ ***The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him. Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."*** The point is, don't focus on eternal life, focus on the here and now, by showing mercy, charity, those around you. Our text from Ruth ends with this line, ***14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*** Ruth clung to her, not because she felt sorry for the woman, but because she truly respected Naomi, was able to put herself in Naomi's shoes. That's charity, offering mercy, treating someone as you want to be treated.

As the story continues, we see that Ruth also offers truth, in the biblical sense, which means reliability and faithfulness. It's not just about language, saying the truth, but it's about living it too. God is often referred to as truth in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32:4 we read, ***God is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He.*** This is taken from the Song of Moses as he prepares to release the Israelites into their own land, and he does so by stating that the God who saved them from enslavement, is the same God who goes with them in the new land. God is faithful and good. As Christians we know Jesus to be the way, the truth, the life. He claims that in the 14th chapter of John as he is preparing to leave his disciples, but he says this, ⁷ ***"If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."*** In Jesus we see the God of truth and justice. And when we follow his ways, we reveal God's truth too.

Ruth states this to Naomi when Naomi tries to get Ruth to stay in her homeland, Verse 16 ***"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."*** Ruth conveys her dedication with her words and as the story continues, we know with her actions. Because together they traveled to Bethlehem, Naomi's hometown. And the God who Ruth commits to, provides loving kindness to them both, through a man named Boaz.

Chapter 2 begins, ***Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz.*** Now the term kinsman meant, Boaz was a male relative who, according to various laws of the Pentateuch, had the privilege or responsibility to act on behalf of a relative who was in trouble, danger, or need. The Hebrew term (*go el*) for kinsman-redeemer designates one who delivers or rescues. Boaz was Naomi's kinsman. And it was in his fields that Ruth was allowed to glean, that is gather grains to be used for food. When Ruth did that, Boaz noticed Ruth, found out who she was, related to Naomi, and allowed her to take extra food. And when Ruth comes home with this prosperous gathering we read, ¹⁹ ***Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz."*** ²⁰ ***Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!"*** Seeing God's hand in these events, Naomi declares that ***the Lord "has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead" (Ruth 2:20)***

Lovingkindness is a characteristic of God that simply means steadfast love. I like the way Micah 7:18 states it, ***18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.*** God delights in

steadfast love, not anger, not judgement, nor penitence, no God delights in lovingkindness proven in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit that is with us always.

In fact the story of Ruth ends like this, ¹³ *So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son.* ¹⁴ *Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin;[f] and may his name be renowned in Israel!* ¹⁵ *He 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.”* ¹⁶ *Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse.* ¹⁷ *The women of the neighborhood 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.* David, you may recall was the forefather of Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus Christ.

Friends, this is a powerful story from which we can learn so much about our God and about ourselves. We learn that charity doesn't mean feeling sorry for another, rather it's a strong emotion that assists and helps, as we would want to be assisted and helped. It's mercy as Ruth was merciful to Naomi, refusing to abandon her. May we not abandon each other. And may we not abandon the children of God around us. Rather may we feed them with food we want to eat, clothing them in clothes we want to wear, caring for them as we want to be cared for and we know are cared for by God..

We learn that truth means reliability and faithfulness. It's not just about what we speak, but it's about living the truth too. Just as Ruth promised to be dedicated to Naomi, she followed through and did not leave her side. May we do the same to those around us. May the vows we took in our marriages, the baptisms of our children, and reception of membership to this church guide us in following the truth of our faith through our living and ways of life.

And we learn that lovingkindness is a love that is steadfast and endures for generations. Just as Naomi recognized God's lovingkindness to her through Boaz and Ruth, may the lovingkindness each of us have experienced through our steadfast God lead us to praise, serve, and thank God for generations to come.

Because friends as the hymn states, “Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found; Brought here together by Christ's love, by love are we thus bound.” (UMH 549) Amen.

Offering Invitation :With your offering gifts, you offer gifts of charity, truth, and loving kindness to communities from Hershey to Harrisburg, from soup kitchens in DC to Africa, and from children's homes in Mechanicsburg to Ukraine. Thank you for your gifts of love.