

THE NAME OF RUTH

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Text: Ruth 1:15–18

Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But 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. 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!” When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

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What does your name mean? Do you know the etymology or meaning of your name? Were you named for someone, and, if so, do you know why you were honored as their namesake? Why did your parents give you your name? If you have chosen your own name, what meaning do you make out of it?

We put a lot of thought into naming our child. Our daughter’s name is Nery. We named her this because it was the name of my wife’s godmother. The ancestor Nery was known for being intelligent and kind, and we wanted to imbue this baby with those named traits. We later found out that her name is of Hebrew origin, and it means “my light” or “my candle.” My spouse Nora was named after her maternal grandmother. Her name’s roots are in the Latin “honora,” which means “honor.”

I wasn’t named for any family member. My name’s origin is in the Hebrew Bible as Adam and Eve’s third son. After Cain killed Abel, they had another son named Seth. It means “anointed.” Seth is also the name of the destructive Egyptian God of disorder, storms, and violence. And there was a group of Jews and then, later, Christians called Sethites, who considered Adam and Eve’s son Seth to be the antecedent of Christ.

As the primary labels of our very existence, the words that will be held in memory by our descendants, our names take on and hold many layers of meaning. You may not necessarily *like* your name, but that doesn’t make it meaningless.

I ask about the meaning of your names because, in our story today, the meanings of names are significant. Today is the first sermon in our *Command to Preach* series, and I was fortunate enough to reach into the bowl of options and pull out this suggestion from member Gerald Mindrum. Dr. Mindrum suggested the book of Ruth as a compelling and interesting sermon topic—and I agree and am grateful for Jerry’s excellent suggestion.

Since we don’t have the time to read the whole book (even though it is fairly short), I will summarize it for you. In the time before King David an Israelite family from Bethlehem was experiencing famine and fled to the nearby nation of Moab. This family consisted of Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their sons Mahlon and Chilion. While in Moab, Elimelech died and the two sons married two Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth. Then tragedy struck again, and the sons died, leaving the three women as widows, which in Israelite society was extra disastrous. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem and tells her daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s houses to find new husbands. Orpah agrees but Ruth refuses. She will not let Naomi go alone, and in the scripture that was read moments ago, Ruth professes her love, commitment and loyalty

to Naomi and will not leave her side. Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem, and Naomi changes her name to Mara. Ruth goes to work in the fields of a wealthy man named Boaz, whom she later marries in a not-necessary-to-explain series of ancient Israelite legal events. Mara becomes Naomi, again and we find out that Ruth and Boaz are the great grandparents of King David.

This is a fabulous and multi-layered story that so much meaning can be made from. One of the primary ways that it has been interpreted is as a feminist island in a sea of Biblical patriarchy. As the theologian Phyllis Trible writes:

A man's world tells a woman's story. . . . The book of Ruth presents the aged Naomi and the youthful Ruth as they struggle for survival in a patriarchal environment. These women bear their own burdens. They know hardship, danger, insecurity and death. No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile, and the unknown.¹

It is also a story of people considered to be outsiders or others. The nation of Moab was a close neighbor of the Israelites. The Moabites were enemies and more or less considered to be just the worst! A passage from the book of Deuteronomy says that Moabites are completely unwelcome in Israelite society. Even someone whose family came from Moab ten generations ago is still unwelcome. It is dictated that "You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live." (Deuteronomy 23:3-6) Moab was the enemy, the other. And Moab is where Naomi's family sought refuge, and Ruth is a Moabite.

In addition, there is another way of reading this story that is mostly hidden from modern ears: the meaning of the names. The names that we hear—Elimelech, Naomi, Ruth, etc.—would hit an ancient listener differently than our modern ears because the meanings of these names would be known. It seems that one interpretation of the book of Ruth is that it is one long allegory in which the names hold clues and give us additional information. Elimelech means "my God is king," Naomi means "pleasing one or pleasantness," the sons Mahlon and Chilion mean "sickness and wasting away." Ruth means "companion." I am going to give you the summary again in the way that an ancient ear may have heard the story:

In the time before King Beloved, an Israelite family from the City of Bread was experiencing famine and fled to the nearby nation of the Enemies. This family consisted of the husband My God Is King, his wife Pleasantness, and their sons Sickness and Wasting Away. While in the nation of Others, My God Is King died and the two sons married two Enemy women—Fawn and Companion. After Sickness and Wasting Away died, Fawn returns home but Companion accompanies Pleasantness back to the City of Bread. Pleasantness changes her name to Bitterness while Companion goes to work in the fields of a wealthy man named Pillar of Strength, whom she later marries. Bitterness becomes Pleasantness again because of the loyalty of Companion.

Changes the way you take in the story, doesn't it? This opens up new modes of hearing and allows us to hear in some ways similar to a speaker of ancient Aramaic. It can even change the way that we speak of the whole thing. The Book of Ruth becomes the Book of the Companion. While it is primarily Naomi's story, it is the Companion who draws our attention.

It is the Companion who has this beautiful litany of devotion saying, "Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die." In the entire story it is only the Companion who displays commitment and love in ways that are not transactional. It is the Companion who saves Naomi, who helps transform Mara back into Naomi, Bitterness back into Pleasantness.

¹Phyllis Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Fall 1976): 251.

And it cannot be overstated that this Companion was the enemy, the other, part of the hated neighbor tribe. It is in the Other that Naomi seeks refuge, and it is the Other who provides redemption at the end of the story. Since this is ultimately Naomi's story, what if we put ourselves in her sandals? What would it look like for us to accept as a Companion someone that our culture has decided is the other, is hated, is the enemy? What would it take for you to be willing to accept as a companion someone who lives in a different part of the city or has a different amount of melanin in their skin or speaks a different language or has clothing of different cultural standards? Someone who lives their gender or sexuality differently than you? Someone who has different politics than you? What would it take to leap the fences of our cultural landscape and accept a companion that is wholly Other? What cost would there be in your family, occupations, friend groups or societal standing? What would it cost you to seek refuge in the Other and then bring that Other into your home and community?

We are all seeking companionship in some way. It is important for our spiritual and emotional health to have reliable, devoted companions. It reduces anxiety and increases resilience. We need someone to help us feel less alone. The etymology of the word companion is Latin, meaning "One who breaks bread with another." We are all seeking someone with whom to sustain our own life. This desire for companionship can take many forms, none better than another, but it is a shared desire by practically all people. So, how do the ways that we culturally create Others stop us from receiving lovingkindness? To ancient listeners, the very fact that Ruth was Moabite would have been enough for them to reject her wholesale. Who does your culture ask for you to reject immediately? With whom are you avoiding companionship that may help turn the parts of you that are bitter back into pleasantness?

While the story eases us into identifying with Naomi, Ruth is an equal partner here, and we would be remiss to not consider the other side of this question. How can we see ourselves as Ruth? For whom could you be companion? For whom could you give lovingkindness in a time of desperation and loneliness? Who is the Other that you avoid giving devotion? We are each someone else's Other in some manner. We each represent something that others may see as the enemy tribe. Naomi the Israelite was equally an enemy to the Moabite Ruth. What can we do to not turn our backs on them? How can we travel to their foreign lands and say "Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die."?

Our culture is built on castes and tribes, on the us and the them, on definitions of otherness. We do not need to abide by these rules. We too can find refuge in the land of the Others. Like Naomi, you are worthy of companionship and should not reject it just because you may not like the form it takes. We can find redemption in the companionship of the outsider and release our places of bitterness back into our pleasantness. And we can be like Ruth and be the companion that devotes lovingkindness on another, taking the risks of leaving our comfortable homes for foreign spaces.

Whatever the meaning of your name, you are capable of being a Ruth, a Companion. And it could be that in this act of companionship, of giving and receiving lovingkindness, that you find your way home, find your true self, and find redemption.