

“Ruth’s Noble Choice: Wherever you go, I’ll go”

Ruth 1:1-18

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Today’s Scripture reading is about a story of Ruth, a Moabite woman. Specifically, it is about Ruth’s full dedication, faithfulness and loyalty to Naomi, her mother-in-law. If you look for a key word that summarizes the whole story of Ruth, it is love! The whole book of Ruth describes Ruth’s full love for Naomi! Just for your information: The book of Ruth has only four chapters. If someone tells you any verses from Book of Ruth chapter 5, that person is not telling the truth! What kind of love does the story of Ruth teach us? What spiritual challenges do we find from this ancient Hebrew story?

Let’s begin with Ruth’s life journey. When Israel was ruled by the Judges, there was a famine in the land, Israel. Naomi and her husband Elimelech left Israel and settled in the nearby country of Moab. They had two sons and both of them married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpha. Then Elimelech died and not too many years later, both sons died. Naomi was left alone without any hope in a foreign land. So she decided to return to her homeland. One day, Naomi took her two daughters-in-law to the border with Israel and said: “You have been so good to me, but now it’s time for you to go back to your own mothers.” Both Orpha and Ruth were good women, comforted Naomi well, but they made difference choices: Orpha decided to return to her home country, but Ruth didn’t. Who did make a good choice or wrong choice is not the point of this story. This is not an ethical question. Our curiosity about Ruth is to understand her faith and to find out how her choice is spiritually important and relevant to us.

Theologically speaking, Ruth’s choice challenges us to rethink about our faith in God. Naomi gave her two daughters-in-law freedom to choose. There was no more moral or cultural obligation anymore as family members. Why did Ruth determine to stay with Naomi? Actually, she had no reason to be with her mother-in-law because Ruth’s mother must be eager to see her daughter returning home soon. We have many other questions such as: why did God choose her to be the great-grandmother of King David and included her as a part of Christ Jesus’ genealogy even though she was not a Jewish woman? What really matters when we look at Ruth’ full dedicated love for Naomi? Let’s go deeper in our story.

I found three important clues to understand Ruth's point-of-view in verse 16. In a way, Orpha's act makes more sense to us. When she was asked to go back to her own mother, she followed Naomi's advice. But Ruth's reaction surprised not only her mother-in-law, Naomi, but also us. She said as follows:

“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.”

Ruth's reaction is very firm and determined. The point is that I will not leave you alone, but will be with you no matter what happens between us. I found three crucial statements that describe the best about Ruth. And these make us critically reflect on our faith in God. First, “*Wherever you go, I'll go.*” This emphasizes Ruth's own voluntary choice to be with her mother-in-law as signs of her full trust and confidence. Second, “*Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.*” Ruth goes beyond her ethnic and religious boundary and limit. Her love has no limit to embrace her mother-in-law's faith legacy as hers. She and Naomi are not separable beings. Lastly, Ruth assures, “*where you die, I will die.*” She points out eternity in her relationship with Naomi. Nothing will separate her from the love of her mother-in-law. **Simply speaking, this is Ruth's faith statement.**

Now I encourage you to imagine this possibility. If Ruth is a spiritual metaphor, how do you understand her? If you read carefully her firm and solid commitment and faith statement again, it is very theological. I challenge you to change your perspective of Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law to a woman who proclaims unlimited love, ever presence and unchanged compassion. Surprisingly, Ruth's promise and commitment is overlapped with God's promise for His people. We find God's faithfulness and compassion in Ruth's confession for Naomi. Ruth promised Naomi three things: ever presence; God beyond ethnic, social and cultural boundary and limit; and the guarantee for eternal living and life. On one hand, Ruth expressed her love for Naomi, but on the other hand, **Ruth is a metaphor of God's love for us!**

If someone asks you or challenges you to summarize Christianity's God with one word, what will be your immediate answer? It is simple. LOVE! And our God is Emmanuel God which means God-be-with-you- always wherever we go, God will go! God will surely find us and care for us! There is no boundary

in God's love. Our God doesn't care about our ethnicity, cultural and social boundary and our gender and personal situations but God embraces us fully regardless of our conditions. God loves us as we are! That has been already proved through Jesus Christ. And our God promises us eternal life in Christ when we have full trust and confidence in Him. Ruth in our story has double meanings as a theological metaphor. On one hand, Ruth portrays our unconditional and loving God, and on the other hand, she is the role model of our faith for God. Faith is a risky choice to begin an adventurous trip with God. It requires your full trust and confidence in God's love and to be bold to stay with God like Ruth's love for Naomi. Will you be willing to take Ruth's love for Naomi as your faith for God?

Interestingly, this story of Ruth is overlapped with my marriage story. In two weeks, we are going to celebrate our ninth wedding anniversary. To make a long story short, her parents were not supportive to our marriage. I didn't know what to do and how to deal with this situation. Even though I loved her, I hoped that Youngjae would make her own choice. I would be okay whatever she wanted to do. I thought she would go back to her parents. But she didn't give up on me. Unfortunately, her parents weren't willing to approve their daughter's desperate wish. So Youngjae determined to leave her parents and family. I told her that she didn't have to sacrifice her career, country and family because of me. I still remember her saying, "I would go where you go. I am full of confidence and trust with joy being with you." What faith she had in me! Youngjae would be Ruth if I were Naomi in this story.

The story of Ruth and her faith teaches us about faith. What does faith look like and how our faith ought to be. What we found in Ruth's love for Naomi is Ruth's willingness, voluntary choice and readiness to begin a new adventurous trip. I believe that faith is like this, departing a new trip with trust, confidence and joy. Do you have this faith? I hope that you will have the faith of Ruth and get ready to begin or continue your faith journey with God. Amen.