## RUTH AND OTHER STRONG WOMEN OF FAITH Ruth 2:16-17

## Living God's Word—A Walk Through the Bible March 2, 2014 Pastor Nathan J. Thompson

Over the years one of the accusations against Christianity has been how it views women. Many have accused Christianity of making women subservient to males; that our whole system is patriarchal in nature. Some have even claimed that the Apostle Paul was a male chauvinist who advocated that women not even speak in the church.

Yet as we read through the Bible we often see that women are lifted up and praised for their faith and leadership. Even at that time in history when women had very few rights, when they were basically the property of their fathers or husbands, the stories and examples of women are shared. In many cases it was these women who were essential in furthering God's salvation history.

For example, in the Old Testament Book of Ruth we amazingly see a whole book of the Bible focused on and dedicated to this woman. What makes this even more amazing is that Ruth was from the nation of Moab, which for the Israelites was a cursed nation. Ruth was of a despised tribe of people.

Now some might surmise that she is given this prominence because she married an Israelite, the son of Naomi. What happened, it is important to note, is that Naomi and Elimilech, along with their family, moved to Moab to find food during a terrible famine. Their son Kilian, in turn, married this Moabite woman named Ruth. Does she then gain distinction from simply marrying an Israelite and being part of his family?

No, that wouldn't be enough to have a whole Biblical book share her story. Rather what set Ruth apart was her faith in God and her love. In fact, some have termed the Book of Ruth as one of the greatest love stories of all time. It is in this story where we see a woman who was very humble; she was not self-centered and had a servant's heart.

As a result God blessed her. Therefore Ruth, following the death of her husband, chose to trust Naomi's God. She also stayed with her recently widowed mother-in-law in graciousness and sacrifice. By doing these things she became known as a woman of noble character. Therefore this woman named Ruth is one of only two women in the Bible who had an entire book of the Bible named after her.

Ruth also becomes one of only three women who appear in Jesus' genealogy. It is from the genealogy of Ruth where we see David being born and becoming the greatest king that Israel ever had. Also from this lineage of Ruth, and David, we see the birth of Jesus born in the stable of Bethlehem. It is an amazing story of God's faithfulness.

What was it then that made the story of Ruth so unique; what set her apart so that her book and story would be shared, and remembered, throughout the ages? The truth is that in this story we see a woman who put her faith firmly in God, who was extremely loyal even when she didn't have to be to her mother-in-law. She was respectful and yet extremely bold, willing to put some risk into her life of faith.

In lifting up her wonderful faith we are reminded of Ruth's beautiful words in Ruth 2:16: "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."

Throughout the history of God's people, throughout God's salvation history, there were many other very strong women of faith and courage. We have the story of Deborah who was a judge; the story of Queen Esther and how she helped save God's people. Each one played a significant and important part in the history and development of God's people.

In the New Testament, of course, we see the wonderful example of the faith of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who responded to God's calling to give birth to his Son. We see Mary Magdalene who came to faith in Jesus as her Savior, and how it was the women followers of Jesus who were the first witnesses to the resurrection.

Even in the case of the Apostle Paul we see how he opened the way for women to be involved in his ministry and in the church. In fact, Paul boldly proclaimed that in Christ there is no longer "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus." Paul empowered Priscilla and other women to be important leaders of his mission.

Throughout the years there have continued to be many strong and dynamic women of faith who have helped lead the church of Jesus Christ, have been centers of strength in their witness of faith and service. I think of people like my grandmother who came to America from Norway all by herself at age 16. She got her education, met and married my grandfather, and they both committed their lives to being missionaries in Madagascar (off the SE tip of Africa).

Just think of the challenges my grandmother faced as she shared the love of Jesus with many natives who had never heard of Jesus. Just think how she lived in extremely difficult conditions raising a family of six children, where these children were sent at age six and older to live apart from their parents at the mission boarding school many miles away.

Just think how these mothers and fathers on the mission field would then send their children back to America for their last couple years of high school and for college; just think of the sacrifices these women made for the sake of Christ; just think of the faith and prayers they needed to have; just think of the strong Holy Spirit calling to ministry and service they felt.

I also think of my own mother and her amazing ministry to our family and the church. I shared at her Memorial Service a couple weeks ago that the most important seminary/religion classes I ever attended were at our kitchen table growing up. My mother knew her Bible better than most people I know; she could teach the Bible, Biblical theology and witness to Jesus better than most professors I have ever had. One reason for this was because God/Jesus for her was never just an intellectual concept—Jesus was a friend.

In her ministry my mother also served in many leadership and service areas in the church. She always prayed diligently for people and churches; she visited and prayed with countless numbers of people who were sick, shut-ins, needing support. She always emulated a strong faith and servant leadership throughout the years. My mother's ministry was never subservient to my father's ministry or to his male pastoral authority—her ministry was centered in her God given gifts where she was an equal partner and team member with my Dad.

Here at Messiah Church this congregation has been greatly blessed with wonderful women leaders and ministers. Many have served and continue to serve as part of Messiah's Church Council and Executive Committee; Sandy Koentop & Ardis Stark went to St. Louis for leadership training and have taught and led Messiah's very successful Stephen Ministry which cares for many in need.

Our congregation also has Faye Giese leading the Prayer Chain; Jennifer Rose leading Little Angels; Pat Hanson teaching Habitudes to our 6<sup>th</sup> & 7<sup>th</sup> graders; Arlou Swenson and many women serving through WELCA and mission quilt making; many faithful women serving on and leading church committees and task forces; Becky Meyer ministering through our office ministry; Laverne, Bev & Gayle ministering on our organ; Shirley ministering through worship input for the projection; and the list goes on and on.

Our congregation is also blessed with Charis Bjorklund, Youth & Worship Minister. She teaches and prays with our youth; she leads worship and our Praise Band; she teaches music and works with our Youth Choir; she directs and inspires our choir to praise the name of Jesus. Charis is definitely a gifted minister who ministers with her God-given gifts, faith and Holy Spirit power.

Now I know over the years that in certain churches, denominations and religious groups the role of women has sometimes been limited. In fact, some denominations don't allow women to be pastors or priests; some won't even allow women to serve in leadership positions or to even vote. There are some who actually believe that a woman shouldn't teach or preach the Word of God.

Yet here at Messiah, along with many churches, we choose to focus on the Bible teaching and Bible truth where God calls all of us, male and female, to serve him faithfully. We choose to focus on how God calls and gives both men and women gifts for ministry and service; that some are called to be pastors, some administrators, some evangelists, some teachers, some Moms and Dads, some caregivers to others.

The most important component, of course, which we learn from Ruth is for us to have our faith and trust firmly in God through Jesus. It is in our faith in God, in our growing trust in him, that we learn to develop the character, the honesty, the loyalty like Ruth.

It is in our faith in God that, like Ruth, we can take a risk to follow God wherever he leads. It is true that just like Ruth being willing to leave her land, God often calls us to venture out of our comfort zones. He often calls us to leave our homes, like he did with my grandmother, and to go and serve on the mission field.

God therefore calls us, females and males, to perhaps take a risk and be a leader in the church or to possibly serve in a ministry. He calls us to learn more about him in the Bible, as well as more about Christian leadership and witness. The truth is that God's mission and ministry to reach the world for Jesus is great, he needs us all involved in using our gifts to his glory.

The story of Ruth then is a great message and witness to us all. Here we witness a woman of a different tribe who becomes a faithful follower of God. Through this woman amazingly a book of the Bible is named after her and she becomes part of the genealogy of Jesus. May each one of us learn from Ruth, along with other great women of faith, how to develop the Godly character and great visionary servant leadership she demonstrates to us all.