

**BETHLEHEM: THE PLACE OF LOVE****RUTH 3**

Part of the fun of the Christmas season is all the entertainment options available at this time of year: special concerts like the Celtic celebration we enjoyed last night, special displays like the Wildlights at the Columbus Zoo, special events like the Nutcracker or Dicken's "A Christmas Carol" at the theatre. Can you imagine my delight and excitement when I learned that the Hallmark Channel produced 19 new Christmas movies this year? I'm being just a little sarcastic.... Cheryl and I enjoy many of the same recreation and entertainment options, but she enjoys nothing more than a sappy Christmas movie. The Hallmark Channel's approach to Christmas movies is predictable. It's usually about a single, divorced or widowed hero often with cute kids finding romance with a single, divorced or widowed heroine often with cute kids, also. The story is usually set in a picturesque, small town just full of Christmas cheer and fake snow. But, since Cheryl puts up with my murder mysteries and actions flicks the rest of the year, it's payback time! Fair is fair. Just guess what I'm watching tonight?!

Come to think of it, the Old Testament story of Ruth reads a little bit like a Hallmark Channel movie script except for the fact that it's all true. There's heartache, suspense, romance, drama, and a great, satisfying ending. It happened in the town of Bethlehem about 1100 years before the most famous event happened in that same town – the birth of Jesus. That's why this year's Advent message series is called *Another Story About Bethlehem: Glimpses of Christmas in the Story of Ruth*. A Jewish woman named Naomi had left her home in Bethlehem with her husband and two sons because of famine. They'd moved to the country of Moab where, after ten years, tragedy struck. Naomi's husband and her two adult sons all died leaving her poverty stricken in a male dominated world. She felt God had abandoned and forgotten her completely.

When she heard the famine was over in Bethlehem, Naomi decided to return home along with her two widowed daughters-in-law. Along the way, she strongly urged both of them to return to their homes and families in Moab. The prospects for remarriage and having a family were far better for them in Moab than in Bethlehem. One daughter-in-law reluctantly agreed, but the other one, Ruth, could not be convinced to leave Naomi. Ruth had become a follower of the one, true God. In addition, she loved her mother-in-law with all her heart and soul. Once settled in Bethlehem, Ruth went out to glean in the fields during the barley harvest. Gleaning is salvaging the grain that's been accidentally dropped or left in the field after the reapers go through it. Providentially, she ended up in the field of a godly, influential man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi's deceased husband. Boaz was incredibly generous to Ruth and allowed her to glean enough grain to feed her and Naomi for a long time.

Bethlehem became a place of hope for Naomi and Ruth both literally and symbolically. Last week, we reflected on how it became a place of peace for them as well. Through Boaz, both Naomi and Ruth found peace from their fears. Today, I want you to see with me that Bethlehem also became a place of love in Ruth's story. By the same token, some 1100 years later, Bethlehem once again became a place of hope, a place of peace, and, yes, a place of love when Jesus, the Son of God, was born into this world

on what we now celebrate as the first Christmas Day. That brings us to chapter three in Ruth's story. What can we learn about love in Ruth's story? First of all –

### **GOD'S LOVE IS REMARKABLE.**

Many of us here today know the Greek New Testament word for God's kind of love. It's "agape." Many times it's defined as an unconditional, sacrificial love. God loves you with no conditions attached and the supreme example of it is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for your sins. A good example is John 3:16 (NLT), "For this is how God loved (*agape*) the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Do you know the most common Hebrew Old Testament word for God's kind of love? It's the word "hesed." While it's often translated "love" in English, it means kindness, faithfulness, loyalty, and devotion. This is how God Himself loves you and me. For example, in Psalm 136:1 (NLT) we read, "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good! His faithful love (*hesed*) endures forever." The last sentence there is repeated over and over again in that psalm like a chorus.

*Agape* and *hesed* have many similarities because both describe God's kind of love. One very important similarity is that God's people are capable of showing God's kind of love to other people. In other words, in the New Testament followers of Jesus are called and enabled through the Holy Spirit to love God and other human beings with God's kind of love. Jesus said, "So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love (*agape*) each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other." (Jo 13:34 NLT) And in the Old Testament, God's people are capable of practicing *hesed* toward God and each other. For example, "O people, the LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy (*hesed*), and to walk humbly with your God." (Mic 6:8 NLT)

Now, God's kind of love shows up all over the place in Ruth's story. *Hesed* is everywhere. It's a kind of love that's remarkable – extraordinary, exceptional, and outstanding. When Ruth refused to return to Moab and stayed with Naomi, it was a prime example of *hesed*. Do you remember Orpah, the other daughter-in-law? She loved Naomi, too, but her love was unremarkable. Orpah's love had limits; it was ordinary, and not particularly exceptional. That's why she returned to Moab. It wasn't a bad kind of love; it just wasn't *hesed* – God's kind of love. Boaz showed Ruth *hesed* by not only allowing her to glean in his field, but by allowing her to collect far more than she would have done under normal circumstances. He gave her access to water and fed her lunch. Remarkable, extraordinary, exceptional, outstanding kindness – *hesed*.

In the third chapter of Ruth an example of God's kind of love is seen in Naomi. She loved Ruth as much as if she were her own biological daughter. She called her just that, "My daughter, it's time that I found a permanent home for you, so that you will be provided for." (Ruth 3:1 NLT) She wanted the best for Ruth – remarriage, children, a family, provision, and security. She wanted Ruth to be happy and fulfilled. She wanted Ruth to be taken care of after Naomi died and not be subjected to a life of grinding poverty as a lonely, single foreigner from Moab. She already knew that a distant

relative, Boaz, had shown Ruth exceptional kindness. He was wealthy and influential – a good catch. So, she put together a clever plan that got Ruth to let Boaz know in no uncertain terms that Ruth was a most eligible young woman. Naomi didn't have to do what she did for Ruth. She went over, above, and beyond. She was filled with God's remarkable kind of love for Ruth – *hesed*.

But maybe the greatest example of God's kind of love in this story is Ruth herself. It may not be apparent at first, but she did more than what Naomi suggested. Yes, she got all gussied up for her rendezvous with Boaz. Yes, she waited until everyone went off to sleep including Boaz before she snuck over to where he was sleeping all by himself. Yes, she uncovered his feet so that they would get chilly and he'd wake up a few hours later and find her there. Yes, she absolutely did propose marriage to Boaz directly. That's what she meant when she said, "I am your servant Ruth.... Spread the corner of your covering over me, for you are my family redeemer." (Ruth 3:9 NLT) That was an idiom in that part of the world for getting married – kind of like when we might say, "Put a ring on it!" In that culture, when a man threw the corner of a garment over a woman, it symbolized the protection of marriage he was offering to her.

So, how was what Ruth did somehow different than what Naomi had advised? Naomi simply wanted Ruth to propose to Boaz because he was a marvelous catch. But Ruth proposed to Boaz by invoking the law of the kinsman redeemer. We talked about that last week. A kinsman redeemer was a member of your clan – your extended family – who could be asked to bail you out of major economic problems like losing your property or being sold into slavery to pay your debts. In some cases, a kinsman redeemer was asked to restore the family line by marrying the widow of a relative who had died. The first born son of this new marriage would be considered the child of the relative who had died and would become the beneficiary of any inheritance.

In that day and time, there was nothing worse than your family dying out. That was the greatest tragedy imaginable. This was what Naomi faced. Her husband had died. Her adult sons had died without any sons. Re-marriage was probably not an option for Naomi herself, because she was likely beyond child-bearing years. So here's what Ruth did. She asked Boaz to marry her in the role of a kinsman redeemer so that their first born son would technically belong to Naomi and would be considered her son legally – a continuation of Naomi's family. It may sound a little bizarre to us, but it was actually a remarkable, extraordinary act of love and kindness by Ruth to Naomi.

Boaz called it exactly that. "The LORD bless you, my daughter.... This kindness (*hesed*) is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor." (Ruth 3:10 NLT) What's Boaz saying there? It's fun to assume that Boaz and Ruth had the "hots" for each other – just like in those Hallmark movies – but we're never told that in the story. Even if Ruth was attracted to Boaz, that's not why she asked him to become her husband. Several times Boaz called Ruth "my daughter" which makes some Bible scholars conclude that he was considerably older than Ruth – maybe more like Naomi's age. In that same verse, he praised Ruth for not pursuing re-marriage with a younger man. She hadn't pursued any

younger men in Bethlehem she might have found more attractive than Boaz. Even if they were younger and had some wealth like Boaz, it didn't matter. Why not? Because it wasn't about who or what Ruth wanted but what was best for Naomi. This marriage wasn't about who or what Ruth preferred at all! It wasn't about passion or greed or anything else. If Boaz said yes to Ruth's marriage proposal, the possibility of Naomi having an heir was once again very real. Wow. That's *hesed*. That's God's kind of love. Remarkable, exceptional, outstanding, extraordinary kindness!

1100 years later, Bethlehem was once again the scene of remarkable love – God's kind of love. God took the initiative by sending His Son, Jesus, into this world. We didn't ask Him to do that. There was nothing loveable about sinful human beings that attracted God's love. In fact, our sin makes us morally repulsive to God. Despite our unworthiness, God demonstrated His love for us in a way that defies adequate description. He sent His Son into the world to die upon a cross and then raised Him from the dead three days later in order to pay the penalty for our sins. In and through Jesus we have forgiveness of our sins past, present, and future. We're invited to call God our Father. We're adopted into His forever family. Because we're invited to enter into His mission, our lives are given purpose and meaning beyond anything we could give our own lives. We're given the promise of eternal life. In giving us Jesus, God gave to us the very best gift imaginable. That's God's kind of love. Remarkable, exceptional, outstanding, extraordinary love! A second truth about love in Ruth's story –

### **GOD'S LOVE TAKES RISKS.**

Ruth had no idea how Boaz was going to react to her little scheme. He could have been offended by her assertiveness. He could have found marriage to a Moabite woman distasteful. He could have rejected her marriage proposal for any number of reasons. He was under no obligation. But from Ruth's perspective, the potential gain justified the risk. Naomi might have an heir after all. Naomi's family line might be restored. It was a risky proposition, to be sure, but Ruth had God's love for her mother-in-law. *Hesed*. A remarkable love that was willing to take a risk in expressing itself.

Was it risky for God to send His Son into this world at the very same place – Bethlehem - some 1100 years later? It sure feels risky, doesn't it? The hope of the world – salvation for all humanity – dependent on the cooperation of a teenage girl and her confused husband. Risky! The hope of the world – salvation for all humanity – dependent on this poor couple finding somewhere for Mary to give birth in Bethlehem. Risky! The hope of the world – salvation for all humanity – most of all dependent on one very weak, defenseless infant lying in a manger. Risky! Some 33 years later, after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension back to Heaven, God turned over His mission to reach lost men, women, boys, and girls to twelve very imperfect men and said, "Go, make as many followers of Jesus anywhere and everywhere you can." Risky!

I said earlier that God's people are capable of showing God's kind of love to other people. If the Holy Spirit lives inside of you, you're capable of *agape*. You can do *hesed*. Your love for others can be, first of all, remarkable. How? You can forgive

someone who doesn't deserve your forgiveness. You can invite someone into your life that many other people in our culture – even, sadly, Christian people - say you should avoid – the immigrant, the refugee, the poor, the addicted, the sexually promiscuous, the hurting, or the ones racially and ethnically different than you. People unlike you. You can meet the needs of people by giving yourself away in remarkable gifts of money, time, energy, and patience that they can't repay. You might come alongside a non-believer and then invite him or her to start following Jesus as Savior and Lord. Let me ask you a question I believe the Lord is asking me, "Are you loving anyone this Christmas remarkably? Is there anything extraordinary, outstanding, or exceptional about the way you are showing God's love and kindness?" There's nothing wrong with unremarkable, ordinary love. It's just not God's kind of love. But isn't demonstrating God's kind of love risky? Oh, my, yes, it certainly is risky! God's love always takes a risk. You might get hurt. You might fail. You might get taken advantage of. You might be scorned. You might get rejected. You might experience ingratitude. Then why do *agape* or *hesed*? Because of the next truth.

### **GOD'S LOVE GETS REWARDED.**

That's one of the great themes in the entire book of Ruth. God sees to it that when we act in *hesed* we will receive a reward either in this life or the next. The rewards for showing or living out God's kind of love are everywhere in this story! Ruth's love got rewarded. Earlier in our story, Boaz said to Ruth about her devotion to Naomi, "May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge." (Ruth 2:12 NLT) Well, God did exactly that, although at the time Boaz had no idea that he himself was part of God's reward in Ruth's life! In a sense, Ruth just invited Boaz to fulfill his own blessing by becoming her husband. Ruth was going to have a husband again, children, protection, and provision - abundance. When you show God's kind of love, it just gets rewarded. Boaz's love got rewarded. He, too, showed *hesed* toward Naomi and Ruth in remarkable ways. He ended up being rewarded ultimately when God gave him a wonderful, godly wife in Ruth. When you show God's kind of love, it just gets rewarded.

Naomi's love got rewarded. Before sending her back home very early the next morning, Boaz gave Ruth a huge supply of barley grain to take back to Naomi as a gift. Boaz said to Ruth, "'Bring your cloak and spread it out.' He measured six scoops of barley into the cloak and placed it on her back." Then, Ruth told Naomi herself, "He gave me these six scoops of barley and said, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" (Ruth 3:15-16 NLT) How much was six scoops of barley? Probably somewhere between 60-90 pounds of grain. It was so heavy Boaz had to strap it on to Ruth's back! All that grain could be turned into flour to feed Naomi for a very long time. God had completely turned Naomi's life around. When she first got back to Bethlehem, she had told everyone, "I went away full, but the LORD has brought me home empty." (Ruth 1:21 NLT) But now God had met her need for physical provision abundantly. And the most wonderful blessing was still to come – the restoration of her family through Boaz and Ruth's marriage. When you show God's kind of love, it just gets rewarded.

Has God's own love – the kind of love that sent Jesus into this world on that first Christmas – been rewarded? Absolutely! God now has a forever family – millions of people from every nation with whom He will spend eternity – and His glory and fame are established forever. Why did Jesus come into this world at Christmas? Why did He allow Himself to be nailed to a cross some 33 years later? The Bible says, "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." (Heb 12:2 NLT) Jesus had an incredible reward in mind when He showed us God's kind of remarkable, risky love. In yet another place, we hear about the reward Jesus received by showing God's love. "Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Ph 2:9-11 NLT) God's love always gets rewarded.

That same principle is true in your life and mine as well. Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz became role models of what happens when you live out *hesed* – God's kind of love. When you and I show God's kind of remarkable, risky love it will get rewarded somehow, somewhere, and in some way. Jesus said to you and me, "Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity." (Lk 6:38 MSG) When you forgive those who don't deserve it, when you invite someone into your life who is not like you, when you meet the needs of people who can't pay you back, when you share Jesus with someone who is far from God, you set yourself up for God's reward somehow, somewhere, and in some way. Of course, that's not the reason you show that love. Nevertheless, you put yourself in the pathway of God's blessing because that's how God's universe runs. God's love just finds a way to get rewarded.

In November 1964, anarchy broke out in what was then the Belgian Congo. Assemblies of God missionary, J. W. Tucker knew he was at risk, but he stayed where God had placed him. One day, a mob attacked and killed him with sticks, clubs, fists, and broken bottles. They took his body, threw it in the back of a truck, and eventually tossed it to the crocodiles in the Bomokande River. J. W. Tucker had risked everything showing God's remarkable love, yet he seemingly had nothing to show for it. But here's the rest of the story.

The Bomokande River flows through the middle of the Mangbeto tribe, a people who were then ignorant of who Jesus was and what He had done for them. During a time of civil war, the Mangbeto king became distressed with the violence and appealed to the central government in Kinshasa for help. The central government responded by sending a man simply known as the Brigadier, a well-known policeman by training, whom J. W. Tucker had won to the Lord just two months before he was killed. Being a relatively new Christian, he did his best to witness, but he was met with no response. Then one day he heard of a Mangbeto tradition that said: "If the blood of any man flows in the Bomokande River, you must listen to his message." This saying had been with the Mangbetos for as long as any of them could remember.

The Brigadier called for the Mangbeto king and all the village elders. He said to them, "Some time ago a man was killed, and his body was thrown into your Bomokande River. The crocodiles in this river ate him up. His blood flowed in your river. But before he died, he left me a message. This message concerns God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to this world to save people who were sinners. He died for the sins of the world; He died for my sins. I received this message, and it changed my life." As the Brigadier preached, the Spirit of God descended and people began to fall on their knees and cry out to the Lord. Many were converted. Since that day, thousands of Mangbetos have come to Christ and dozens of churches have opened. It's the result of the message from the man whose blood flowed in the Bomokande River.

God's love is always remarkable. And, yes, God's love takes risks in demonstrating itself to others. But, ultimately, God's love gets rewarded somehow, somewhere, and in some way. That was true in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. That was true in the life of Jesus Himself some 1100 years later. That was true in and through the life of J.W. Tucker. And that can be true of your life and mine.