

Farmville Baptist Church
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Risk Kindness
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Today in our fruit of the spirit series, we're focusing on kindness. As we mentioned last week, our world sure needs kindness right now. In Scripture, kindness is equated with goodness, with excellence and uprightness. Colossians 3:12 tells us to cloth ourselves with kindness. Again this week, we can correlate the fruit of the spirit with I Cor. 13 where we read that love is patient and love is kind. The implication, of course, is that to love, is to be kind.

One way to think of kindness is as an inner disposition, that expresses itself in little ways, ways we almost don't think about. These small acts of kindness can be as simple as greeting someone with a smile or helping a neighbor carry in his groceries. We can randomly pay the toll for the next person behind us at the toll plaza, or take the time to send a card or make a phone call when someone is ill. Family of faith, you do an amazing job with these every day acts of kindness, and I pray that we will continue. After all engaging in these acts of kindness costs very little, if anything at all, and they can make a huge difference in someone's day.

Another way to think of kindness is to think of larger, more costly deeds that we risk to benefit another person. When I think of folks in Scripture who model this for us, my favorite is Ruth. (PAUSE)

The story of Ruth may seem like a heartwarming tale of family love and second chances, but this family faces one tragedy after another. When the story begins, there is a famine in Bethlehem, which ironically means "house of bread." Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion become refugees when they decide to migrate to the land of Moab to find food. Moab was an unlikely new home for this Hebrew family. Genesis 19 tells us that the

Moabites began as a result of incest between Lot and his daughter. When the Israelites encounter the Moabites in the book of Numbers, the results are not good. In this narrative, the Israelites are on the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. King Balak of Moab hires Balaam to curse the Israelites, but he is foiled by divine intervention. In Numbers 25:1-3, when Israel was encamped at Moab, the men consorted with Moabite women which led to religious idolatry. By the time Deuteronomy was written, Moabites were forbidden from entering the assembly of the Lord, and Israel was not to promote a Moabite's welfare or prosperity. The decision to leave Bethlehem and go to *live* in Moab, while radical and foolish, reveals the depth of the family's desperation.ⁱ

Yes, things were difficult in Bethlehem, but they don't get any better when the family gets to Moab. Elimelech, the family bread winner, dies, and Naomi is left to raise her two sons alone in a foreign country. When the boys reach adulthood, they marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, which I imagine didn't sit well with Naomi. Then, to compound the problem, Naomi's two sons also die, and all three women ó Naomi and her two daughters-in-law find themselves widowed and severely disadvantaged. Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible notes that at this point, Naomi is stripped of her identity. She has moved from wife to widow, from mother to not mother. The security provided by a husband and children is no longer hers; the definition of worth in that culture no longer applies to her. The blessings of old age (given through children and grandchildren) are no more.ⁱⁱ At this point, Naomi cannot point with any confidence to YHWH's blessing on her life. She accuses YHWH of having turned against her, leading her to a bitter end (She even changes her name from Naomi ó which means sweet to òMaraö which means bitter).

Then, Naomi learns that there is food in Bethlehem, so she and her two daughters-in-law begin the journey back to Judah. It's not long, however, before Naomi realizes that this is a bad idea. It occurs to her that when she arrives back in Bethlehem, the girls will be a liability to her

ó they are widows, they are likely poor, and worst of all they are Moabites who do not worship YHWH exclusively, if at all. So she encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' homes.

She says to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me."⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband. Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."¹¹

Do you remember two weeks ago when we talked about the woman at the well and the idea of Levirate marriage ó that you if you were married to a man who died, his next younger brother would marry you? We see that tradition in this story as well. Naomi says, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me ó even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons ó¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!

The three women weep together, then Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and departs ó she it appears ó is the obedient one. Ruth, however, clings to Naomi, who encourages her again. "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods, you do the same."

But Ruth refuses, uttering one of the most beautiful messages of commitment in all of Scripture. We hear it often at weddings, and that's appropriate ó but this is the original context. Ruth says,

"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.
¹⁷Where you die, I will die ó
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 she was determined to go with her, the text says, "Naomi said no more to her." Does that mean that she gave up trying to persuade her? Or does it mean that she gave her the silent treatment? If it was the silent treatment, it would have been a long walk back to Bethlehem – perhaps with Ruth wondering if she had done the right thing.

At first, things do not improve for Ruth. When the two women arrive in Bethlehem; no one even inquires about Ruth, and Naomi does not acknowledge her presence. Naomi goes as far as to say that she went away full, but that the Lord has brought her back empty. At this point, Ruth, who has sacrificed everything for Naomi, who has risked this extraordinary kindness in remaining with her, Ruth is an invisible "other." The next three times she is mentioned it is as "Ruth the Moabite."

Ruth, however, refuses to allow others' stereotypes to limit her. While Naomi remains at home, perhaps still emotionally paralyzed by her bitterness and pain, Ruth takes the initiative to go to the fields to glean food for them. At this point, when Naomi bids Ruth goodbye, she calls Ruth her daughter (not merely daughter-in-law), however, she does not give her any instructions or warnings about how to keep herself safe in the fields. Single women gleaning were often victims of physical and sexual violence, but it is Boaz, a distant relative, who teaches her these things and instructs his field hands to leave Ruth alone.

When Ruth first meets Boaz, to seek permission to glean, Boaz does not speak to her. Instead, he asks the head servant, "To whom does this young woman belong?" Boaz does not inquire about Ruth's name, but the name of her owner. The servant responds by identifying Ruth with the familiar label, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of

Moab.ö Apparently, Boaz has heard of Ruth's loyalty and commitment to Naomi, and now he engages her directly. Whereas Naomi originally told Ruth to go back home, here Boaz tells her not to go and glean elsewhere. Instead he asks God's blessing on her, provides her with lunch, and instructs the harvesters to provide easy grain for her to glean.

Although gleaning provides for Ruth and Naomi's short-term food needs, it does not provide them long-term security. As two widows living alone, Ruth and Naomi remain vulnerable.ⁱⁱⁱ

As chapter three opens, Naomi becomes involved in the quest for their long-term security as she initiates a daring plan that Ruth must implement. This is R rated reading and best, so let's suffice it to say that Ruth's carefully executed encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor results in a marriage proposal. I doubt that this was what Ruth had in mind when out of kindness she pledged her unwavering support to Naomi. But her actions show that Ruth is a strong woman. Phyllis Tribble observes, "A foreign woman calls an Israelite man to responsibility. Boaz reacts to Ruth, he doesn't initiate. Ruth is portrayed throughout as a maker of decisions, and a worker of salvation."^{iv} Eunny Lee writes, "Ruth's proposal is indicative of women everywhere who must overcome socially constructed obstacles in order to secure a future for themselves."^v

As the story unfolds, Boaz and Ruth are married, and she bears a son. The women of Bethlehem clearly identify the child, whom they name Obed, as Naomi's redeemer.^{vi} Obed's arrival restores to Naomi the security and blessing of old age that were stripped from her in Moab. Once again she is full. Naomi owes her restoration to the kindness of a Moabite woman. As the townswomen remind Naomi, "It is your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, who has born Obed."ö In a society where sons were valued above all else

and where seven was the number of completion, to identify Ruth as being more than seven sons was an expression of ultimate worth and value. (Pause)

This story is striking in its immediate context because it shows us the deep and lasting impact that Ruth's kindness had on Naomi. But Ruth's kindness extended far beyond this small family circle. As some of you may know, Obed is Ruth's son and was the father of Jesse. And Jesse was the father of David - King David - who was of course an ancestor of Jesus.

Ruth could never have known when she said, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people will be my people and your God my God," that she is a woman and a Moabitess who would have a role in redeeming the world.

In a similar way, our acts of kindness have the potential to multiply and have far reaching effects. I've told the story before of the young girl with cancer who hosted a lemonade stand to raise money for cancer research. This one act of kindness is now a state wide effort each year, sponsored by large corporations. Over the last 20 years, lemonade stands have raised over 1.6 dollars for childhood cancer research.

In 2015 several friends agreed to help Kevan - a young man with muscular atrophy - see the world. Kevan is wheelchair bound due to his disease, but he wanted to see places that he couldn't get to in his chair. In an unusual act of kindness, his friends designed and built a back-pack that they have used to carry Kevan across Europe and China - so far. Now, their original act of kindness is taking on much larger issues of accessibility around the world.

So what might it mean for us to Risk Kindness? I know it will mean that we continue to model everyday acts of kindness. But what if God were to call us, like God called Ruth to risk extraordinary kindness, perhaps from the midst of our pain and grief, to leave behind all that is familiar to walk alongside another? What if God calls us to risk everything we have, personally

or as a congregation, in new ways or in new places, perhaps where we might even be considered a nobody? How will we respond, knowing that through our kindness, we might just help change and redeem the world?

ⁱ. Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider*, 120-121.

ⁱⁱ. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric*, 167-168.

ⁱⁱⁱ. May Say Pa, "Reading Ruth," 53.

^{iv}. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric*, 184.

^v. Lee, "Ruth the Moabite," 97.

^{vi}. Obed means "worshipper" or "one who serves." Robert Hubbard asserts, "Obed 'served' Naomi by becoming her *go'el*, or redeemer. He 'served' her by assuring her family's survival and providing her food. . . . Obed's name perhaps added the nuance 'servant of Yahweh,' for in the end his service of Naomi served Yahweh's larger purpose as well." Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 277.