

“Fruits of the Spirit: Kindness and Faithfulness”

Ruth 1

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

My son and his family have moved to new house this past week; actually, right around the corner from me. My oldest grandson has announced that now he can just get on his bike and come to my house any time! I have been reflecting upon just how precious a gift our children are to us. And what an awesome responsibility God has entrusted to our care – to share with these children the stories of faith. Sometimes, many times, children have something to teach adults. I came across these cute and funny stories of children and I thought it would do us good to laugh a little this morning.

*A mother was preparing pancakes for her sons, age 5 and 3. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancake. Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. “If Jesus was sitting here, he would say, “Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.” The older son turned to the younger brother and said, “Okay, you can be Jesus.”

*The preacher was wired for sound with a lapel microphone, and as he preached, he moved briskly about the chancel area, jerking the mike cord as he went. Then he moved to one side, getting wound up in the cord and nearly tripping before jerking it again. After several circles and jerks, a little girl sitting in the third pew leaned toward her mother and whispered, “If he gets loose, will he hurt us?”

*A Sunday School teacher asked her children, as they were on the way to church, “And why is it necessary for us to be quiet in church today?” Her smart little daughter immediately replied, “Because people are sleeping.”

*A little boy was overheard praying, “Lord, if you can’t make me a better boy, don’t worry about it. I’m having a real good time like I am.”

Our children are watching how we model Christian discipleship. They are paying attention to the choices we make and the values we demonstrate. Being a Christian is not simply about how much we know of the Bible or what we profess we believe. Our actions, how we treat each other, models for others whether our words and our actions are authentic and consistent.

This morning I am continuing a series of sermons on the fruits of the Spirit. Several weeks ago we celebrated Pentecost, the day Jesus fulfilled his promise to his followers to send the Holy Spirit to them in his stead to provide guidance, comfort, community and faith. We cannot see the Holy Spirit but we certainly can experience the true manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Paul names the manifestations/fruits/outwardly visible signs of the Holy Spirit in his letter to the Galatians: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.” Last Sunday we considered love – agape love. Agape love is a self-sacrificing love which seeks the best for another person or pursues the common good. From agape love is born the remaining fruits of the Holy Spirit. This morning I invite us to consider kindness and faithfulness. The word in Hebrew for steadfast kindness, which is used over 250 times in the Old Testament- is *hesed*. *Hesed* is a rock solid, steadfast faithfulness and kindness which describes God’s relationship to his people:

“Though the mountains be shaken and the hills removed, yet my unfailing love, says the Lord, for you will not be shaken.” (Isaiah 54:10). *Hesed* is a loving kindness that is so enduring that it persists beyond any sin or betrayal to mend brokenness, graciously extending forgiveness: “No one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though he brings grief, the Lord will show compassion, so great is God’s unfailing love.” (Lamentations 3: 31-32)

Biblical scholar John Oswalt describes *hesed* (God's kindness and faithfulness) this way:

“The word *hesed* is the descriptor par excellence of God in the Old Testament. The word speaks of a completely undeserved kindness and generosity done by a person who is in a position of power. This was the Israelites' experience of God. He revealed himself to them when they were not looking for him, and he kept his covenant with them long after the persistent breaking of it had destroyed any reason for his continued keeping of it. Unlike humans, this deity was not fickle, undependable, self serving, and grasping. Instead, God was faithful, true, upright, and generous – always.”

Hesed. Faithful or steadfast kindness. It is not just a feeling but an action. And if we say we are people of God, followers of Jesus Christ, we rejoice in God's steadfast kindness shared with us. And, in turn, God invites and expects us to demonstrate that same steadfast kindness to one another.

Prayer for Understanding

Read Ruth 1.

In the opening words of this Old Testament book we discover a family in trouble. Tragedy descends upon the Israelite family of Elimelech. A famine drives the family away from their home in Bethlehem - which means “house of bread” in the Hebrew language. It is ironic that this family leaves the house of bread in search of bread. Maybe the turn of events would have been different if they had trusted God to provide and stayed put? But they decide to leave the house of bread and they pick an unlikely destination - the country of their enemies - the despised nation of Moab. Surely no good will come to Elimelech's family in Moab; not a wise choice. But sometimes when we are in crisis, we do not make wise choices. We lose our sense

of direction; we miscalculate our source of support and sustenance. It is difficult to think clearly when the winds of crisis are whipping us in the face.

Sure enough, while in Moab, the storm winds gain strength. First, Elimelech, the husband and father, dies. Then his two sons marry Moabite women - an action forbidden by Israelite law.

And so, we are not surprised when their marriages to foreign women - Moabite women - lead to further disaster. No children are born to Elimelech's sons and then they die prematurely. The downward spiral is now complete. Naomi, wife of Elimelech, is left alone, in a foreign land - no husband, no sons, no marketable skills with which to support herself. Only two Moabite daughters-in-law. I believe we can truthfully say that Naomi has been stripped of all that gives her life and identity – her extended family and home of origin, her husband, and her sons.

Naomi is caught up in one of those horrendous storms of life. Perhaps the result of her own choices, or maybe she is simply a victim of fate. Regardless of who is to blame - and the blame game rarely comforts us or directs us into the future - her grief is bottomless. She cannot even imagine what the future holds for her. And her life crisis precipitates a faith crisis. She believes that God has now totally and completely abandoned her - “the Lord’s hand has gone against me.” Depression and a crisis of faith lock a person in the present moment of despair.

While Naomi is living in the midst of her wilderness tragedy, she begins to experience a puff of God’s Spirit, God’s *hesed*, blowing in her life through the person of Ruth. Ruth’s words to Naomi are the most powerful words of kindness and faithfulness/fidelity in scripture. “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, your God my God. Where you die, I will die - there will I be buried.” It is notable that in Ruth’s words there is no judgment spoken; there are no words telling Naomi that she should do this or do that, or should think this or believe that.

There is a commitment in Ruth's words to journey even through the valley of death with Naomi. Ruth's pledge of steadfast kindness reflects God's steadfast kindness shared with us. *Hesed* is the bone-weary father who drives through the night to bail his drug addict son out of jail. *Hesed* is a grown child who spends every day visiting an elder parent who can no longer care for themselves and relies on the child to prepare their meals or even feed them. *Hesed* is the kind of love/ kindness that can be counted on, decade after decade. *Hesed* is self giving and always steadfast. In our culture today we are consumed with individualism and we tend to forget how our actions might affect someone else; we don't even know what it means to selflessly "cling" to someone as Ruth clung to Naomi and as God clings to us.

Why did Ruth commit herself to Naomi?

I believe that Ruth loved Naomi and understood her need for a loving and faithful presence in her life. Ruth was able to think about the needs of another person and step outside her own individual needs or preferences.

Ruth and Naomi make it to Bethlehem where Ruth meets and falls in love with a wonderful man, Boaz. They eventually marry and conceive a son. Ruth - a woman alone, vulnerable, at a dead end, a Moabite woman, considered an outsider to the Israelites, through her fidelity, kindness and willingness to journey with Naomi, risking her own security for the sake of another, has a child in Bethlehem.

Ruth mediated the presence of God for Naomi in such a way that Naomi could once again experience new life. And the child Naomi will eventually hold in her arms is no ordinary child. The child will grow to become the grand father of King David and the great great great grandfather of another baby born in Bethlehem - in a manger. And the name of that child will be Jesus, which means "God will Save."

I am always in awe of people who turn their own adversity into the kind of *hesed*, steadfast kindness, which God calls us to demonstrate as fruits of the spirit indwelling in us. One such person I have known was Martha Tomlin. When I first visited Martha in her home in Milledgeville, Georgia, where I was serving as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, she shared how she had been diagnosed with a progressive eye disease that had left her legally blind. Martha was devastated. She had always been active and independent and then to suddenly realize that her sight was to be taken away from her, brought her to her knees. She said that for about a month she played the role of victim and wailed about the adversity which had hit her. After that month, it occurred to her that perhaps there were other people out there who were suffering from the same diagnosis. If she was willing to seek them out and journey with them, then together they could explore resources which would help Visually Impaired Persons continue to live independently. And so, she began a ministry, the Presbyterian Church in Milledgeville being the host to that ministry. She named the ministry VIPs – Visually Impaired Persons. That ministry, which hosted a monthly lunch gathering – creating community for people who often felt isolated because of their lack of vision. Martha would arrange for a program which introduced the VIP's to local resources. The VIP's have continued to meet for 30 years and continues today even after Martha's death. Martha's ministry for people who live with visual challenges has touched hundreds and maybe more in the Milledgeville community and given birth to hope. Ruth's love and grace and loyalty were reflected in Martha Tomlin. God's *hesed* was reflected in Martha Tomlin.

How do we demonstrate God's *hesed*? Are our actions kind and faithful? Do other people experience the love, kindness and faithfulness of God through us? How are we teaching and demonstrating kindness and faithfulness to our children?