

## “Ruth: The Outsider”

We’re continuing this summer series of messages, looking at some people from the Old Testament. Today we’ll look at Ruth. We learn of Ruth from the Old Testament book bearing her name. It is the time of the Judges (1200-1020 B.C.). There’s a severe famine in Israel. A Hebrew named Elimelech and his wife Naomi set out with their 2 children to try to find food in the country of Moab so they can survive.

While there, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi with her 2 sons. Eventually both sons marry native Moabite girls, but tragedy strikes again as both young husbands die. Having tasted the cup of bitter sorrow, Naomi decides to go back to her native Hebrew home. She urges her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and return to their parents.

After some coaxing, one of the women does go back (Orpah), but the other, **Ruth**, insists on leaving Moab and going with her mother-in-law. Look at her beautiful words, found in Ruth 1:16: “But Ruth said, ‘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.’”

William Barker, in a character study, calls Ruth, “The Outsider”. And she was! First of all, she was a **widow (a young widow)**. If you are widowed, you probably know that losing a mate can make you feel like an outsider. Where once you were a couple, now you are alone. Where once you did things with other couples, now you may feel out of place, the “odd man out”, the odd lady out”. AARP once did study of older Americans. “More than two-thirds of women 75 and older say they haven’t had a romantic hug or kiss in the last six months. That’s the harsh reality of aging, especially for the large numbers of women who have lost their partners.”

For Ruth, it was probably worse. She lived in a male-dominated society. Hebrew widows were viewed as surplus articles in the economy. With her husband gone, Ruth sensed that her worth had suddenly been reduced to nothing. She would have to scratch out an existence in whatever way she could.

Ruth was an outsider, too, because **she had no children**. In Hebrew society, it was a disgrace to not have children. Her dead husband Mahlon had been denied the immortality of having his name live on in a male child. There was a custom called “Levirate marriage”, which stated that if a man died, his brother next in line would marry the widow, and if possible father children so the family name could continue. This was a humane law for the time. But that didn’t help, because Ruth’s husband’s only brother had also died. So, while Hebrew women around her prided themselves on their fine sons, Ruth felt the sting of being barren – a childless outsider.

Then too, Ruth was an “outsider” because **she was a foreigner**. Her homeland was Moab. Over the years, relations between Israelites and Moabites was often tense, even hostile. Ruth chose to marry an Israelite, and when she entered into that interracial marriage she no doubt felt resentment from her Moabite friends and neighbors, but neither was she accepted with open arms by all of the Hebrews around her. Ruth found herself feeling some rejection from both sides, much like those in a mixed marriage may feel today.

Ruth was also the “outsider” because of her *religion*. The tribal deities that Ruth and her Moabite neighbors worshiped were vastly different from the God of her husband’s people. Although perhaps she felt herself drawn to the Hebrew God Yahweh (Jehovah), she wasn’t sure this God would receive her, since she was not of Hebrew lineage. *William Barker is correct: Ruth is “The Outsider”*.

***Aren’t there things we experience that make us feel like outsiders, that we don’t belong?***

This happens with *children and youth*. A child notices some little girls on the school playground. A few are whispering to one another, and snickering. Then the child realizes they are saying nasty words about *her*. A group of teenagers are going to the beach, or having a party among friends. You’re sure you are going to be invited. But it doesn’t happen, and you realize you’re not part of that inner circle of friends.

Have you ever *moved* to a new town, or a new state? You know what it can feel like to be outsider, don’t you? You go to the supermarket, or Walmart, and you know you won’t see anybody you know, because you’re in a new place, and hardly know anyone yet. One year our family had a surprise move to a new church. We had to quickly pack, say our goodbyes, and move to the new area. It was the end of August. Our three children had to go to new schools, when they had no time to get to know other children. Our one son was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and he hated the move. Soon afterwards we were told by his school teacher that she had seen him at recess, standing along the fence, all by himself. She forced him to intermingle with kids. Boy, that went through me like arrow, as I hurt for him.

A position opens up *at work* that would be a promotion for us. We feel qualified, and really want the job, but we’re passed over for someone else. Or worse, after working for a company a number of years, we’re let go. Somehow we feel like on outside looking in, when we thought we were a valued employee.

Sometimes in our *families* we can feel like an outsider. While some in the family seem so close, we never sense that we’re included. It can happen in *marriages*: we feel excluded by our husband or wife. “He makes these plans, but he never includes me”...“She’s so busy with the baby and her housework, she forgets she has a husband.” When it comes to families, I think our time is especially one that generates feelings of being an “outsider”. So many have grown up in homes where there is a divorce, or are living in stepfamilies. Maybe you’re not quite sure where you belong. Our oldest son went through a divorce he didn’t want. Soon after he and his wife separated, one of his boys, who was about 7 years old at the time, asked me: “Are we still going to be family?”

Maybe some of us feel like we’re outsiders *with God*. Perhaps we have questions about God, whether there is a God. Or we don’t feel any kind of bond with our Creator. Maybe we’ve done some bad things, and we’re not sure God could ever accept us. Or we’ve just neglected God for so long that we’re not sure God would even want us now. *Ruth was an outsider...and in some ways, so are we.*

***But the Book of Ruth is not a just sad story of a lonely outsider. It's an inspiring account of a woman able to triumph over misfortune and personal tragedy.*** Why did Ruth insist on going with Naomi, leaving her homeland of Moab behind? The Bible doesn't say. Perhaps it was because of her fondness for Naomi, her Hebrew mother-in-law.

*But if you read between the lines, it seems Ruth is also committing herself to her husband's Hebrew God. "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16). She was willing to throw her life and future on God! And eventually, Ruth marries an honorable, godly landowner named Boaz, who's a distant relative of Naomi's dead husband. They have son, so that the Hebrew family line of Naomi's husband lives on. More importantly, this child is **Obed**, who becomes the grandfather of King David, and a descendant of Jesus the Messiah! *Ruth, the stranger from Moab, finds an important place of belonging as part of God's people and part of God's plan for the salvation of the world!**

***The story of Ruth is a word of hope for us lonely outsiders! For one thing, God invites us to be on the inside of His circle of love.*** We were created to know the warmth of being included in God's family and friendship circle. Sin keeps us on the outside, but Jesus came to take us lonely sinners by the hand and lead us into the secure circle of God's forgiven sons and daughters. Perhaps you're thinking: I don't deserve to be on the inside of God's circle of love...the things I've done...the ways I've ignored God." A salesman said, "How can I expect God to remember me when I've never remembered Him? Well, *none of us* deserves it, but through the death of Jesus for our sins, God reaches out in our loneliness and isolation and draws us close. This is offered as a gift – something we cannot earn or don't deserve. This is called "grace". All we can do is *accept it*, thankfully!

Even as Ruth, a Moabite woman, experienced the God who included her in His family, ***she also found a place of acceptance among God's people. The Church, as God's people, is meant to be a place where all are to be included, and not feel like outsiders.*** One church wanted to note in their bulletin, "Ushers will seat latecomers." But there was a typo. Instead of an "e" in seat, someone typed a "w". So the message read, "Ushers will swat latecomers." Well, the Church is intended to be more welcoming than that!

*Sometimes certain members are made to feel like outsiders.* A congregation may be slow to welcome a new person and their ideas. I'm thinking of one church I pastored, where a gifted young woman with leadership qualities became a member after moving from a different area. But even after 4-5 years, in leadership roles, she told me she still was treated like "the new kid on the block" by some of the longtime members.

God wants the church family to be a place where we welcome outsiders and make them feel included. Jesus did that! He welcomed all kinds of people – religious and non-religious – and said they could have a place in His Father's eternal family. How open are we to those who are different from us? To those with a prison record... those with mental problems...gay people ...people on welfare...people who differ from us politically...or those who interpret the Bible differently than we do? I hope can include them!

When's the last time you visited a church as a stranger? Do you remember what it felt like to be an "outsider"? Most every church will say they are a friendly church! But, if you ask someone who came as a first time visitor, you often get a different answer! In most every church, regular attenders cluster around in their little groups with people they know, and tend to ignore guests, newer people. I've seen it time and time again, and it pushes my "hot button". I've been to so many church suppers where newer members, or people who just started to come, are ignored, while others will sit at tables with family members or close friends, having a grand old time. Often Nancy and I have deliberately sat next to these people. Otherwise they would be sitting there all alone. *The church is meant to be a warm place, where outsiders are made to feel at home!*

*Many "outsiders", like Ruth, have beautiful qualities hidden in them. They can be led to Christ or blossom in His service if we only welcome them as Jesus did!* God taught me a lesson years ago. I was pastor of three small churches. One of the congregations was having a church picnic one day. A family was there, not members, who came occasionally, but just to Sunday School. I didn't know them. I admit, I felt some resentment towards them. They didn't come to church, but here they were at the picnic! That afternoon I spent some time talking with the man. He seemed nice. And after that, they started to attend worship. In a slow, quiet way, I believe they were awakened spiritually. Both of them were school teachers, and they became leaders in that church. Nancy and I developed a friendship with them. They were beautiful Christians. Their daughter, after high school, went to a Christian music college, and after graduating, went into a music ministry for the Lord!

There is good news for all of us lonely outsiders like Ruth! God invites all of us to come inside of His circle of friendship and salvation by letting Jesus come into our lives as Savior and Lord and Friend. And God wants His people to be a community where outsiders of all types are welcomed and loved!

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