

SUNDAY BIBLE STUDY NOTES

— March 25, 2018 —

Pastor Les Smith

SERIES: Friendship: The Tie That Binds

SERMON: Ruth and Naomi: Marks of True Friendship

TEXT: Ruth 1:14-22

Central Message:

Last week, we considered two Old Testament characters who modelled for us what authentic community looks like and how to experience it in our own lives. As we stated previously, our name, Amity Bible Church, literally means friendship. As we continue to examine friendship from a biblical perspective, we will look at another unusual friendship...one between two women, Ruth and Naomi, to see if we can glean more that can lead us along the path of developing authentic friendships.

The Book of Ruth is one of the most charming of all the books of the Bible. It tells how Naomi, a Hebrew woman, is bereaved both of her husband and her two sons in the land of Moab where they had gone to live. Naomi decides to return to her homeland in Judah and expects that her daughters-in-law will stay behind and remarry in their native Moab. Orpah chooses to remain in Moab, but Ruth refuses to abandon Naomi. In one of the most provocative and moving speeches of all of biblical literature, she 'clings' to Naomi: "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. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more if even death parts me from you!"

We want to consider what this story says about the nature of friendship itself. The family history was hardly propitious for this friendship to flourish. Naomi is consumed with bitterness at the loss of all the key males in her life, so much so that she begged to be called ‘Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me’. In these circumstances, she has no right to expect anything of a daughter-in-law. But Ruth is blessed with a generosity, a capacity to love, that triumphs over Naomi's inconsolable pain and grief.

Ruth pledges to stay with Naomi for the rest of her life. That is a profoundly moving story of human intimacy, for it entails a lifelong commitment to an older woman of her father's generation, not her own. What's more, it breaks through the constraints of roles within the family into something that is marked not so much by duty as by a truly humane joy. What drives Ruth is not that she owes anything to her mother-in-law...Naomi has already released her from that debt. It is purely her love for her as a woman and as a human being.

We see three clear marks of authentic friendship that emerge from this text.

Mark #1: Naomi was blessed by Ruth's character. From this, we glean that true friendship is a test of our character. (Ruth 1:14-16a)

¹⁴ And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ Then she said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you....”

When it comes to relationships, character is everything. Character shines a light on motives as well as conduct. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi was an unlikely friendship. Ruth was a young woman with her whole life ahead of her, and Naomi was an old woman with little hope of finding a husband. Ruth was a Moabitess, an idol worshipper all of her life, and Naomi was a god-fearing Jew. Naomi was returning to her homeland, and Ruth would be going to a strange land with strange customs, and she would be leaving her gods behind. So what was her motivation...what made Orpah decide to return to her people and Ruth to pledge fidelity to Naomi until her dying day? Ruth loved Naomi, and she wanted to be with her. She wanted

nothing from the relationship other than to be a constant companion to her mother-in-law. It was Ruth’s character that was one of the distinguishing marks of this unique friendship.

Mark #2: Naomi was blessed by Ruth’s commitment. From this, we glean that true friendship is a test of our commitment. (Ruth 1:16-18)

¹⁶ But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.” ¹⁸ When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she ^{le}said no more to her.

When it comes to friendship, some people are just “involved” in the relationship and others are “committed”. A funny story is often told to illustrate the difference between involvement and commitment. As the story goes, a chicken and a pig were walking down the street together. The pig got hungry and suggested that they have a ham and egg breakfast. The pig was outraged by the suggestion and said, “That is very well for you to suggest because, from you, it only requires involvement...for me, it is a total commitment”. The inference is pretty clear. The pig had to die in order for there to be ham for the breakfast. He was unwilling to make that commitment.

When it comes to the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, Ruth made exactly that commitment. She expressed a vow so solemn that she was willing to fall into the hands of the living God if anything but death separated the two women. That is what commitment looks like. She was willing to set aside her plans for the future...she was willing to give up the possibility of a husband in her own land to give her life in service to Naomi. Ruth’s commitment is one of the distinguishing marks of their true friendship.

Mark #3: Naomi was blessed by Ruth’s sense of community. From this, we glean that true friendship is a test of our sense of community. (Ruth 1:19-22)

As the story progresses, Ruth continues to demonstrate her devotion to Naomi.

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Disregarding the danger, she goes out on her own to glean in the barley fields. When Boaz offers her lunch, she carefully saves some of the food to bring back to Naomi. (Ruth 2:18) She cares for the older woman, making Naomi’s comfort and security paramount, and she seems to want nothing in exchange other than Naomi’s company.

Ruth had one focus...the care and comfort of her mother-in-law, Naomi. She assimilated into a foreign culture, adapted the ways of her new homeland, and found the favor of Boaz, a relative of Naomi. She constructs a plan where Ruth was to surprise Boaz in the middle of the night on the threshing-floor in an attempt to persuade him to marry her. Ruth has not shown any particular interest in Boaz, but keen to make Naomi happy, she obeys Naomi. (Ruth 3:5) Boaz turns out to be very open to marriage, and he sends Ruth home with six measures of barley. When Ruth returns to Naomi, she presents the barley to her, saying, “He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said that I should not come empty to you.”

We have no evidence in the text that Boaz intended the barley for Naomi, but Ruth was *always* thinking of Naomi, and she understood any gift that she received was a gift for Naomi. In addition, the text recalls Naomi’s painful statement upon her return to Bethlehem that God had brought her back empty. Ruth was aware of Naomi’s emptiness, and she was trying her hardest to fill the void. Ruth and Naomi became a community within a community. Such is the nature of small groups, and this sense of community is another distinguishing mark of true friendship.