

So, a question to start:

Can a story that barely even mentions God tell us something tremendously significant about the God who has mostly gone unmentioned? Moreover, the question extends; can a life that barely mentions God still make a mute declaration of the God in whom one believes? Put those questions in the back of your mind, as we prepare to hear God's Word.

I don't often do this, but I need a show of hands from you so we will know what we're working with today. How many of you are at least somewhat familiar with the story of Ruth from the Old Testament? Very good!

Now, how many of you consider that to be an endearing story from the Old Testament?

For all of you, I am so sorry for what I'm about to do.

Ruth is a risqué story. There is a lot going on in Ruth. I can be a little bit prudish when it comes to talking candidly about things, particularly when I'm standing in a pulpit. So I'm going to hold back from telling you what the really risqué stuff in Ruth is. But you know, we don't do ourselves or our children any favors if we believe the Bible is somehow G-rated or sterile, when it just isn't...*it just isn't*.

So, "feet" in the Old Testament does not always mean feet. It is a euphemism. When the Seraphim are flying around with their six wings, covering their eyes with two, flying with two and covering their feet with two, it is not because they are embarrassed by their lack of pedicure. Feet mean from the waist down.

Now to be clear, this is an Old Testament distinction; it does not extend into the New Testament. Think about that awhile, and you realize why that would be problematic.

Now, y'all listen to this!

Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her (Ruth), "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Now, here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Now, wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes. Go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies down, then... then go and uncover his feet, and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

And she (Ruth) said to her, "All that you tell me, I will do."

So, (this picks up later on in the story) Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together the Lord made her conceive and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, that his name may be renowned in Israel. He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher for your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has born him." And then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed, and he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

And so there's a lot more going on in Ruth's story, and I wanted to tell you a little bit about her, because she is Jesus' great-grandmother, either 30 or 43 generations removed, depending on whether you take Luke's or Matthew's version of the story. That means her story is part of our story, because we're grafted into the story of Jesus Christ.

But we may need to go back a bit and pick up some information, so we can understand just exactly what's going on in this odd story we just read.

You see, Ruth's world was a little bit different from our world. Her ways were not our ways. Her people's ways were not our ways. She lived a scant existence. Really in those days, it was subsistence, unless you happened to belong to a class of wealthy landowners. That's a pretty small subset; that wasn't Ruth's lot in life. She was a woman from Moab and not an Israelite.

A number of years ago, I taught this book to a children's group. Now, obviously I did not share with them the risqué nature of Ruth's story. But I needed a way for them to understand she's different, she's separate, she's removed. And so I pointed out to them the fact that being a Moabite was a serious strike against her in this culture. She wasn't one of the Israelites, but even more than that, she was a *foreigner*. I told them they had to hiss and to recoil in horror at that moment if they were going to accurately portray the reaction the folks in the story. She wasn't one of the Israelites.

As the story of Ruth begins in the portions we didn't read today, Naomi, who is really the central part of the story, has moved. She is the mother of Ruth's husband, but at the beginning of the story, she and her family are living in Israel when a severe famine strikes. There's no work to be had. There's no food to be had. And so they did what people have historically always done, when there is no work to be had and no food to be had. They moved. They left their home, and they traveled to a foreign country to find work and food. Naomi's misfortune was that her sons, her *Israelite* sons met and married Moabite women. Ruth was a foreigner, we read.

When I was teaching this story, the kids that at this point would hiss. And you haven't done that! Ruth was a *foreigner*! (*Hiss.*) That's a little closer to the reaction you would have gotten.

They were foreigners! Israelites and foreigners didn't mix. You look at Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament and the Israelites and foreigners **do not mix**, and yet her sons had married below their place in society. They'd married these Moabite women! No sooner do we meet Naomi's sons than we get a pretty quick hint that this is not going to end well. Their names are *Mahlon* and *Chilion* in Hebrew. Those translate to *weak* and *sickly*. And within the first chapter, they're dead. And so it is that Naomi, an *Israelite* woman, in exile in a foreign land is left with the custody of her two *Moabite* daughters-in-law. I say custody, because possession isn't quite the right word. Ruth and Orpah aren't property, property properly understood. But neither are they free agents. They are not free to just go and do whatever they want to do. You see, they are bound to their dead husbands' households. They are bound to provide an heir to their dead husbands' household. Those heirs would in turn provide for them in their old age. That's the security blanket: you have a son; your son cares for you in your old age. Remember their ways were not necessarily our ways.

That's for the most part as it should be.

We face a lot of the same issues that the ancients did, but our way of going about them is sometimes a bit different. We all want the same thing, which is to understand our place in the world and what God wants from us, and for us. That we share in common with them.

But some of the practices we don't share. One faith practice that just jumps to mind we don't share with the ancients is that of levirate marriage. Levirate marriage was the means by which the next-of-kin would see that an heir was provided. If a woman was left widowed with no sons, then her husband's next-of-kin was required to provide an heir. That could be her father-in-law; that could be her brother-in-law; that could be her cousin-in-law (you see where this is going.) It's not really appealing. Being a single mother in those days was a challenge.

Being a single parent is always a challenge, isn't it? I don't have children, but having children is a calling. It has to be, for all the work you're going to do. And single parents, I think, have a particularly tough time. My sister-in-law heads up a ministry in her church for single parents. She was herself for many years a single mother, and she knows firsthand just how hard it is. It's hard for two people, but it's even harder for one. When she saw that I was preaching on Ruth, she remarked about how much she loved the book and she asked which chapters I'd be preaching on. I said the 3rd and 4th. She said that it's such a wonderful story. Then I told her about the feet, and she replied, "Now *that's* desperation." That is desperation. That's what levirate marriage is; therefore, it is for that desperate

moment when there is no next-of-kin, when a man died without his male heir. It was a means of protecting the property via the family, but it also protected the woman by giving her someone to stand up for her in her old age. That *is* desperation.

When Naomi turns to her daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, and offers them their freedom from her, from their obligation to provide this male heir to fulfill their household duty, it is a desperate act. It is an act of bereavement that she had nothing for them. She has nothing more for them. She's a stranger in a strange land. She says, "You may go. You can leave me." But then, their prospects are bleak no matter how you cut it. Because, who's going to marry a woman who is still under obligation to her dead husband's household? No, they won't get married again.

And so they make different decisions. Orpah takes her relative freedom, and with it she returns to her family's household, where she will remain. And Ruth. Ruth must have really been in a fix, because she sticks with Naomi.

Some years back, there was a popular piece of music played frequently at weddings. It was entitled *Entreat Me Not to Leave Thee*. It was wonderfully popular for a season. I always find that mildly amusing, because when we come to this point in Ruth, where she is making this profound declaration, she is not speaking of romantic love with her husband. She is declaring her devotion to her mother-in-law.

The book of Ruth is a wonderful story that fills in the gaps from where we started to where we came today into the household with Naomi, and in the fact that Ruth eventually became the many times great-grandmother of Jesus, and the third great-grandmother of King David. I haven't done it justice. It's a short book, and I hope you'll read it. There is an image that arises throughout the book of Ruth that is the one I want us to understand and to know. That is the image of the next-of-kin. It's pretty clear, I hope, to all of us that levirate marriage is not a practice to which we need to return.

There are a lot of ancient Hebrew practices we don't hold to, that have become in some way peripheral to our Christian experience. We can just leave levirate marriage in that category. But we do need to understand it. It tells us something about who God is. We don't need to move on too lightly until we understand this concept of acting as a next-of-kin. In Ruth and Naomi's world the family was all the security you had. That's why the family ties ran so deep. They didn't necessarily like each other. It turns out they did, but they didn't have to. In Ruth and Naomi's world what you see is these two women getting a raw deal, because no one has stepped forward to fill this role for them. To properly follow this practice of levirate marriage with its custom of the Kinsman Redeemer ought to have filled in the gaps for them. It should have shown that they would be provided for - at least as well provided for as their families could make them. It

was the duty of the family; it was the duty of a next-of-kin, and it was a right that the woman had to expect. It turned out there was a kinsman, but he wasn't willing to fulfill his duty. He couldn't for whatever reason. And so it came to Boaz, who became Ruth's husband, to step in to become what is called Kinsman Redeemer, to provide for her household, to do the right thing.

In a stunning reversal, Ruth's poverty and lack of status are redeemed by the gracious act of her husband's cousin. What I love about Ruth's story is that it tells us something of how God would have us behave toward each other. God is rarely mentioned in Ruth, only the very beginning and only at the very end, that portion we read today. But the implications of how Ruth and Boaz and the community act make clear the value that is attached to taking action on behalf of God's people. Ruth's story reminds us that for God...for God, it's important that we act for those who cannot act for themselves.

Many Christian traditions follow a practice of having godparents present at baptisms. The function of the godparents is to be a part of a child's life and to ensure that the child - the godchild, as he or she matures, is instructed in the particulars of Christian faith. Most folks think of godparents and think of an extra birthday present. But really the job of a godparent is to step in and to be sure that this child is going to be raised in the Christian faith. If the parents are for some reason deceased or incapacitated, the godparent's job is to see that their godchild is raised in the Christian faith. Being a godparent is a big honor. But it is also a big responsibility.

Our Presbyterian tradition does not have godparents. On occasion I'm asked if someone can stand up with the parents at the time of baptism, and I always permit it if there's room in the chancel. But we don't call them godparents. Now, why don't we? Because every single one of you has promised to act as a next-of-kin to anyone you have committed to in this sanctuary. Moreover you promised to act as next-of-kin every time you've been present at a baptism and you have said yes, when asked that question by the elder. Our children don't get two godparents. Our children get 532 godparents. That's the current membership number here. 532 people who have pledged to step in as next-of-kin to see that they are raised in faith and raised with love. And what's more, if you're feeling deprived that you didn't have godparents as a child, each one of you has 531 godparents, godsiblings, who are pledged to stand with us at every stage of our life -- at the cradle, at the graveside, at the bedside, at the wedding, at the birth -- to be present in joy and in mourning with one another.

I've heard a lot lately about how we live in a time of diminishing commitment. I've heard that the tie that binds society together is perhaps a bit frayed at the moment. I saw a wonderful picture this last week, on the web. It was a split screen. On one side of the screen there was a Romney-Ryan sign in front of a house. And on the other side of the screen was an Obama-Biden sign in front of a house. These were neighboring houses. In each one of the signs was

fashioned a homemade sign that pointed at the other one and said, "But we're still friends."

Churches are no different. We have different ways of seeing the world. We have different things we consider of the utmost importance. But there's one thing we have in common, one thing other than a lot of godchildren. That is we all have the same Kinsman Redeemer.

Not too long ago, I was having lunch with a colleague. We were talking about the future of our denomination. There's really no question that within the Presbyterian Church USA there is a broad diversity of theological thought. We have a common Book of Confessions of a common Book of Order, but we don't have a lot else in common sometimes. My friend and I were discussing it. He said, "You know, interesting thing -- the Bible doesn't say that we're going to be one in Christ. The Bible says we are one in Christ right now. Right now. Therefore, we have to figure out how to deal with it." I've thought a lot about that during this political season. We are one in Christ. And we've got to figure out how to deal with that.

And I've thought a lot about what commitment means in this commitment season. I keep hearing how we're in a low commitment time of life, but I am not convinced. We seem to keep on making that commitment to seek the best for each other and to love one another, to be sure that we support one another and our children. We keep making that commitment that each one of us has 531 next-of-kin who are willing to stand up for us. And what that means -- I get this is going to sound odd, but we already discussed marriage and feet, so really what have I got to lose? What this means is when we say we're committing, then if one of you were to stand up this moment and say, "I'm desperate. I need help. Please help me." That help would be instantly forthcoming. That's the sort of commitment that we're making. That is the opposite of a low commitment. When we come up here and place our commitment card and our surveys on the communion table, we're not just throwing a number in a basket to be tabulated to see whether or not we'll be able to keep the lights on and the air conditioning going, and pay our bills. We're making a commitment. We're reaffirming our commitment to be with each other and for each other, just as God is with and for each of us.

What I love about Ruth's story is that it is proof positive that you can say a lot about God, without throwing a lot of words around. Now, I know there's nothing wrong with talking about God; I do it all the time. Indeed there are many times when we do need to name what God has done and give thanks. But sometimes, what we *do* says as much as anything we will ever say. I guess that's about it, when you get down to it. None of us is ever left abandoned. None of us is ever left without someone to turn to when the moments of desperation, or maybe a few lesser moments, come upon us. We're never left alone. We have next-of-kin in the abundance that only God can give. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.