

## **Your People will be My People**

### **Ruth 1:1-18**

Perhaps my favorite Bible study to lead is “Bad Girls of the Bible.” Liz Curtis Higgs has written several of these books about various women in the Bible, those named and unnamed. She contends that these women were: Bad for a Reason, Bad for a Season, or simply Bad to the Bone. While Ruth may not show up in these books, although she may (I haven’t read all of them), both she and Naomi might be viewed as Bad Girls in light of the religious restrictions of their day.

This story takes place around the time of the Judges, which Brandon referred to last week. A time not that far removed from the giving of the Law during the Exodus, yet a time when people did what was right in their own eyes. This is what we read in the book of Judges:

<sup>8</sup> Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of a hundred and ten. <sup>9</sup> And they buried him in the land of his inheritance...<sup>10</sup> After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. <sup>11</sup> Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. <sup>12</sup> They forsook the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of

Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. Judges 2:8-12

With that knowledge, perhaps we should not be surprised to learn that, during a famine, a certain Hebrew resident of Bethlehem in Judah would choose to move his family from their hometown to the neighboring nation of Moab. If people had forgotten the Lord, they likely had forgotten the prohibition about living among foreigners and learning their ways. Elimelek was doing what seemed right to him for the benefit of his family. Would anyone think to talk him out of the move? Are we surprised to learn that Elimelek dies in Moab, leaving his widowed wife and two sons? If he was truly living in opposition to God's Word, shouldn't we expect a negative outcome, as some commentaries ask?

We don't know the age of these sons at their father's death, but eventually the sons reach a marriageable age and take Moabite women as their wives. Again, a no-no according to Hebrew custom. There is much left out of this story. Knowing that the life of widows was mostly heartache and struggle, one wonders how Naomi managed to raise her sons in a foreign land. Perhaps they were old enough to work and support her in her widowhood. I wonder, were the people of Moab amenable to helping a widow from another nation? Does this unknown backstory play into the ensuing story of Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law? What we do know is that after about 10 years of

married life, Naomi's daughters-in-law found themselves widows as well.

What are three widows to do, again, knowing that the life of widows in the ancient Near East was a very precarious situation? Naomi, having received word that the famine in Bethlehem was now past, decided to return to her hometown. But what to do about these two foreign daughters-in-law? Life will be difficult enough for Naomi, returning as a widow. How will people respond to these two women, how would they manage to live, what would become of the three of them?

The text leads us to believe that there was a tight kinship between these women, despite their differing backgrounds. When Naomi tries to send the younger women back to their mother's homes, they both resist. We really don't know if Naomi was more concerned with their welfare or her own, but in any event Orpah is finally persuaded to return to her family of origin. Ruth, on the other hand, will not be dissuaded from following her mother-in-law into foreign territory. It is at this juncture that Ruth states her determination in no uncertain terms:

<sup>16</sup> ..., "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."

That sounds like good girl talk to me. At this point, Naomi understands there will be no sending Ruth away, and the two of them travel on together to Bethlehem.

Matthew Henry in his commentary on these verses from Ruth, would refer to Naomi as someone who was bad for a season. He wrote this:

Her new alliances in the country of Moab could not make her forget her relation to the land of Israel. Note, Though there be a reason for our being in bad places, yet, when the reason ceases, we must by no means continue in them. Forced absence from God's ordinances, and forced presence with wicked people, are great afflictions; but when the force ceases, and such a situation is continued of choice, then it becomes a great sin.

So, Naomi is reclaiming her good girl status by returning to her people, even if she is bringing along a Moabitess.

Whether or not she knew Naomi's God, the God of Israel, Ruth was already acting like a child of God by following his commands to care for widows. In fact, both women had opened their hearts (reciprocally) to a foreigner and welcomed them to their table. I think it would be difficult to consider either of these women bad girls at this point.

Despite political and religious animosity on both sides of this story, love prevailed. The love of Elimelek for his family, risking the move to a foreign country to find sustenance for his wife and children. The love of

Mahlon and Chilion for their Moabite wives. The love that developed between Naomi and her daughters-in-law. All flying in the face of societal norms of their day.

The love we see in this story travels down the centuries, until we read in the Gospel of Matthew about the lineage of our Lord Jesus.

<sup>5</sup> Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,  
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
<sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David.

Take note that in the lineage of Jesus, these two women are not of Israelite descent. Rahab, the harlot that saved the spies at Jericho, and Ruth, the Moabitess, both feature prominently in the lineage of our Lord and Savior. Only two other women are mentioned in the lineage of Jesus that begins with the patriarch, Abraham. The others are Tamar, another bad girl, who bore twins to her father-in-law Judah, and Jesus' mother, Mary.

In her commentary on today's Scripture, Kathleen O'Connor wrote this:

This providential, inclusive God acts through the enemy, through the one least likely to matter in the community. Matthew's Gospel includes Ruth as a foremother of Jesus in the family tree (Matt. 1:5) making Jesus the offspring of mixed race and ancestry of dubious reputation. Jesus' own genealogy is a theological

statement that includes the nations, the enemies of Israel, the excluded ones.

What I take from this is that there is room enough under God's tent for all people, regardless of their national origin or politics. He even allows space for those coming from different religious paths, to find the one true God.

Both women took their turn being the outsider, the foreigner, in this story. In the end, they were both blessed by God. Today, there are many "Naomi's" in our world. People living in the aftermath of tragedy and upheaval, looking for hope in an often-hostile world. We are called to be "Ruth's" to these people. To offer to walk alongside them in their journey, to give sustenance as we are able, to be the visible heart, hands, and feet of Christ to those who suffer. May it be so.

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