

The Rest of the Story

“Practice *khesed*.”

Ruth 1:11-19a

Heart Strings: Lessons for relationships from the Ancient Heroes #3

Rev. John H. Hice

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First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Holiday Hesitation

What do you think you'll do for Mother's Day? That might be a risky question, I know. Mother's Day is supposed to be a sweet holiday with the sending of cards and gifts of flowers. It's when we give our mothers appreciation and Moms can expect special treatment. Breakfast in bed, a nice meal out, expressions of affection, other members of the family waiting on her hand-and-foot: well, that's what we picture.

Yet, I've got colleagues who are careful not to mention it. One of our friends told us that this was one Sunday out of the year that she took pains not to go to church. "Too painful," she said. Problems with children, grief and sadness, trauma suffered at the hands of an abusive parent: say the words, "Mother's Day," and some people don't enjoy it at all...especially if they go to church and the pastor starts working the crowd with the questions, "Who's come the furthest to be here today?" "Who's got the most kids or youngest baby?" And the favorite, "Who's the oldest mother here?" and you see several women looking, nervously around.

Mothers Day is not a holiday to be trifled with. Yet, it's still good to have a time like this to honor those we love and think about the way we get along.

Khesed

If you go to enough weddings, sooner or later you'll run across a reading of this passage from the Old Testament Book of Ruth. "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge: thy people shall be my people; and thy God my God..." The language is beautiful. The words speak of the kind of commitment you'd dream of in a marriage. Few people, though, know that these are not words spoken between two people making a covenant of marriage. They don't know the story, that these words are spoken by a young woman to her mother-in-law.

It's a moment of heartache. Naomi and her husband *Ē·lim´e·lech* were Israelites from Bethlehem and had become refugees in Moab during a time of famine. After a long time had passed, *Ē·lim´e·lech* died and their sons married Moabite wives. After

another 10 years, both of the sons also died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law with no support. Now, out of deep concern for the young women, Naomi was sending them back to their own mothers so they could have a chance to remarry and make a new life for themselves. It's a sad time, and hard for the young women to leave. One of them turns to go back to her people. She kisses her mother-in-law goodbye. But Ruth holds on; it says she *clings to her*.

That's when Ruth says these words with such resolve: *Where you go, I will go...your God will be my God*. But why?

A central phrase that's used in this passage is *deal kindly*. It's translated from the Hebrew, *khesed*," meaning to do loving kindness. It usually refers to the way God treats people, God shows loving kindness in being merciful and giving care.¹ The rescue of the Hebrew people from Egyptian oppression was an act of God's *khesed*. Jesus was all about God's *khesed* when he healed the broken and took in the outcast.

Khesed is not reserved only for God, though. Throughout the Bible, people are called on to show loving kindness to each other. *Khesed* is displaying a loyalty that goes beyond the requirements of the Law, beyond expectation, and beyond anything the recipient deserves.²

Naomi is bitter because of the loss of both her sons. Now she has no one. But it's out of her loving kindness that she turns the remainder of her family back to make a new life for their selves: an act of a true mother. Equally so, though, it's Ruth's loving kindness that will not let Naomi go.

Both of them travel back to Bethlehem, almost completely bereft. Naomi renames herself *Mara* because she is so bitter. They may have an idea how much they would need each other. They have no idea how their love will become a blessing to them and all of humankind.

Maybe Mothers Day gets touchy because it becomes all about some ideal of motherhood that's difficult for anyone to live up to. What if we concentrated more on the *khesed* we share back-and-forth?

About 25 years ago there was an over-population problem among elephants in South Africa's Kruger National Park. Rangers tried to solve the problem by shooting some of the older adults and sending their orphans to another preserve. In the following years, though, the young males started acting up. They formed into gangs of juvenile

delinquent elephants and went about goring white rhinos and making other trouble. Park attendants recognized that these young elephants had not had the chance to be taught proper behavior by an older generation and needed role models, so they brought in older bull elephants who taught them how to behave and soon they straightened out.³

Throughout God's creation, the young need the mature. Pity the young who don't take time for those who are older than they. Pity the church that pushes the aging out from leadership roles, just when their wisdom flowers. Pity the President who takes no advice from predecessors. Pity the young woman who despises the advice of her mother. I sometimes wonder if we would fare any better through this tough time that we're so near economic depression if we were to ask for a word from those who lived through the '30's.

Ruth knows she needs a mentor. Ruth needs a mother in her life, she needs someone who will be there for her with *khesed*; and she chooses her mother well.

Poor, bitter Naomi, also, needs a daughter. Listen to her and she sounds like someone who's ready to give up. Yet Ruth stays with her.

Khesed. Rosemary was an older member of a church I served. She was a wonderful and usually cheerful sort of person who was ever faithful to her church and her friends. We were all concerned when she broke her leg, putting her out of commission without any close family to care for her. But when I visited her I was encouraged by her description of a wonderful visiting nurse by the name of Don who came and cared for her and supervised her therapy. What started out to be a professional relationship became a great friendship. It wasn't too long before Rosemary was back in circulation; and not long after that when Don started showing up at church, got married in one of our church services and joined the church.

You'd think that would be blessing enough for everyone. The story doesn't stop there, though. There's a "rest of the story" to tell. Rosemary was diagnosed with a progressive disease that would mean continued weakening and eventually, death. That's when Don and his wife's friendship showed true character. When Rosemary wasn't able to live in her home, they took her in. They set up a hospital bed in a room they prepared for her. They cared for her day and night until the day she died: no strings attached.

Khesed: back and forth.

There's a "rest of the story" for Naomi and Ruth, too. The two women made it back to Bethlehem. Ruth went to work in the fields, providing a livelihood for the two of them. Then, it was a cousin of Naomi's that appeared on the scene: a wealthy landowner by the name of Boaz who was impressed by Ruth's loyalty to Naomi. That's when the older woman coached the younger to win his favor and Boaz took Ruth as his wife and Naomi, too, had a home and a family once again. Ruth gave birth to a son and named him Obed. Then Obed's son was Jesse, who was father of David who became Israel's greatest king and ancestor to Jesus. And, as Paul Harvey would have said, *that's the rest of the story.*

Khesed: God's loving kindness shared between people and generations. *Khesed*, the condition God wants to be kept in our families and shared with those we make into parents and children. *Khesed*, all-around.

May you choose your mothers and your fathers well. May you accept the blessing of the younger generations into your life.

Going Home

And today, I'm going to see my mother. She might tell you it's been a long time.

It's been long enough.

References

- [1] Kathleen R. Farmer, Ruth (annotations), The New Interpreter's Study Bible (NRSV). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2003. p 385.
- [2] Ibid.
- [3] "The Delinquents", CBS News Web Site.
<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2000/08/22/60ll/main226894.shtml>