

“Tough Love”

In the Face of Opposition, part 3

Ruth 1:1-22

[title slide] *Welcome and prayer*

Holy, Awesome God, you reign over everything on earth and in heaven. We come before you this morning as your church, humble, repentant, not trusting in our own good works, but in your all-sufficient love and grace. Teach us how to be the hands and feet of Christ as we listen to your voice today. Challenge and equip us to live for you. We pray this in Jesus’ precious name. Amen.

[waterfall] In May 2014, our family spent a weekend near Tahquamenon State Park. The boys and I decided it was a good day to walk the river trail, and so the three of us left my wife and daughter at the parking lot and headed upstream for a four-mile hike. Actually, that is only half-true. My boys started the hike without me, so for the first frantic quarter-mile, I was running up the trail, panicked, trying to catch up with them before they fell into the river or were eaten by a bear. I did eventually find them and we wandered along the trail, enjoying the rustic beauty of the U.P.

There came a point on our journey, however, when we lost the trail. Or rather, it lost us. I didn’t fully realize we were in the middle of the spring flood. About 55,000 gallons were crashing over the waterfalls every second, and of course, the river had spilled over its banks. The trail was completely under water and we couldn’t find it. Rather than doing the smart thing...turning around and heading back, we...OK...I decided to bushwhack ½ mile back to the highway. My boys said, “OK, Dad. We’ll follow you.”

We spent that last ½ mile sloshing through snow, swamps, and trees. The last fifty yards, I carried the boys through six inches of cold, swampy water, just to get back to the road and walk another ½ mile with our shoes going “squish-squash” until Katja finally rescued us.

My boys taught me a great lesson about loyalty and love that day. Tough love. Love in the face of opposition. They followed me.

[Guide] Have you ever followed someone through unknown territory? Perhaps they were your leader, your boss, even (gasp) your pastor. What made

you follow them? Did you even have a choice? Why did you trust them? Was it loyalty? Was it tough love?

Loyalty and trust are powerful. We want them in our relationships. And there is someone in the Bible whose display of tough love and loyalty blows me away. Her name is Ruth, and this is her story.

[Ruth and Naomi] Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Naomi, a Jew from Bethlehem, who moved with her husband to Moab in order to survive a famine. Naomi’s two sons both married foreign women. But then Naomi’s and her two sons died, leaving three widows trying to survive.

Naomi did the sensible thing; she packed up and headed home to Israel, hoping to find help. Her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, initially set out with her. They had grown close to their mother-in-law. Even though they could stay in their own country, where they spoke the language and knew the customs, they clung to Naomi, weeping, and insisting that they would travel back to Bethlehem with her.

It’s not like Israel was “all that and a bag of chips.” In the time of the Judges, Israel was faced oppression, war, scandals, sin, murder, and a leadership void. Moab represented a slightly better option than Israel. And yet, Ruth and Orpah insisted that Israel was their destination, too, because that’s where Naomi was headed.

Naomi tried to dissuade them by painting a glum picture for her daughters-in-law. Where were they going to find new husbands in Israel? Literally, if Naomi married that very night, gave birth to twin boys, and thereby provided new husbands for them, would Ruth and Orpah wait 20 years for them to grow up? It was a ridiculous prospect. Naomi insisted on sending the girls back to Moab, where they might have a decent chance to find a new life.

Orpah saw the logic of the argument, kissed Naomi goodbye, and headed back home. But Ruth made a different decision, not based on logic, but on loyalty. She said to Naomi, “Where you go, I’ll go. Your home will be my home, and your God will be my God.” It made no sense, but Naomi could not talk her out of it. So off they went to Bethlehem, just the two of them, clinging to all that they had: each other.

Ruth was resolute in the face of the unknown. Think of what she was risking. She was an outsider. She even changed religions! She had no idea what to expect in Israel. Who makes that kind of sacrifice for their friends or family? (Side note: Sam does for Frodo in the Lord of the Rings, but that’s fantasy.)

You might think, “OK. Ruth was loyal to Naomi. What’s the big deal?” Let me tell you the rest of the story.

[Ruth glean] Their life was miserable. They had no income and no family. Ruth did what the poorest people did at the time: she went into the fields to glean crops. Gleaning was a hard but common way to survive if you had no other choice. You simply went into a field after the harvesters and picked up whatever was left. Scavenging, in other words. It was dangerous. As a gleaner, you were working in a stranger’s field, with a bunch of other people you didn’t know. You were constantly bent over, scanning the ground for any small grain that could be eaten. You could be mugged. Even if you could get enough food, it wouldn’t last more than a day. It was a hard life, but it was better than begging.

Ruth’s husband was dead, her mother-in-law was depressed, the country was foreign, the work was grueling, and still Ruth remained loyal.

[Ruth and Boaz] Finally began to look up. While gleaning, Ruth met a man named Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi’s husband. He offered Ruth lunch, protection among the workers, and even instructed the harvesters to “accidentally” let some of the grain fall where Ruth could easily pick it up. Ruth returned home with plenty for both of them to eat and told Naomi all she had experienced. Naomi was thrilled with this news. “Boaz is one of our kinsman redeemers,” she said.

A kinsman redeemer is someone who could restore a family and protect their interests, especially for their poorer relatives. Among their duties, they could provide an heir for a brother who died, redeem land a relative had been forced to sell, redeem a relative sold into slavery, and even avenge the killing of a relative. Sort of like Inigo Montoya in the movie, The Princess Bride: “Hello. You killed my father. Prepare to die.” Fans of the Princess Bride movie know that Inigo was a kinsman redeemer for his father. I’m sorry to say there was no epic swordfight in Ruth, but Boaz did redeem Naomi’s family. Here’s how:

Naomi sent Ruth to Boaz’s barn, all dressed up, and told her to watch until he fell asleep, and then uncover his feet. Now, if you take this literally, it seems a little odd. “Uncover his feet?” My wife teases me all the time that my feet are too cold at night, and I have to put on socks. But that’s not what is meant here. This was basically a marriage proposal. Ruth indicated to Boaz, “I’m available.” And in doing so, she was completely at his mercy.

It’s one thing to risk starvation and ridicule by leaving Moab and coming to Bethlehem. Now, Ruth risked scandal and more: going at night, to a place exclusively for men, and propositioning a man who was superior to her in wealth and status. Remember, Ruth had been working overtime to show how much she loved and respected Naomi. It was this ethic that first impressed Boaz. Now, Ruth trusted not only Naomi’s advice, but also Boaz’s reputation as a kind and generous man. One false peep from him, and everything she worked for would be lost. What a risk!

Imagine this scene: Boaz worked hard all day, ate a huge meal, and lay down in what he thought was solitude, instead waking up to cold feet. The Bible says he woke up startled. Really? “Startled?” How about stunned? Shocked? In this amazing risk, Boaz finally realized how much Ruth trusted him not to put her to shame.

Boaz was impressed by Ruth’s loyalty. Ruth could have run after younger men, or simply abandoned Naomi. Instead, she chose to seek out her kinsman redeemer at all costs.

[Ruth’s baby] Boaz did redeem Naomi’s family and married Ruth. They had a boy, and named him “Obed” – a form of the word redeemer. Naomi’s family line was saved. Ruth and Boaz were happy. This story really sounds too good to be true.

Is that all this is? Another love story? Certainly the book of Ruth is a shining light in the dark of disorder, a great story of how God helped some widows. But there is more to it than that.

Ruth’s story is a gut check for all of us. How much are we willing to give up for our friends and family? Assuming our relationships are healthy, does our loyalty to our friends supersede our own comfort level? Are we like Ruth? Or more like Orpah, the one who turned back?

I don't want to be Orpah, the one who got left behind and was never heard from again. I want to be Ruth. She was faithful. Think of all the despair she faced: Leaving the only home she ever knew. Waiting for Boaz to make up his mind. Trusting everything Naomi told her to do. Naomi's part in this arrangement was huge. The trust between these two women was unstoppable.

[Hands] Loyalty and trust. “Where you go, I will go.” Ruth never gave up on Naomi. And the thing is, God never gave up on me, and he won't give up on you, either. Think about how Ruth took a scandalous risk to approach her kinsman redeemer. Isn't that the way we should approach Christ? He is the Lord of Lords and King of Kings. Jesus is far richer and more worthy than we could ever be. Yet, we can come to him and ask for redemption, and he graciously gives it to us. We don't have to come in the middle of the night or in secret, socks or no socks. Christ is always ready to receive us.

[Scripture] 2nd Timothy 2:13 says, “Even if we are faithless, Jesus remains faithful.” If you want to know loyalty, trust and security, look to the kinsman redeemer, Jesus Christ. He has your best interest at heart. He won't ever leave you or forsake you. He will teach you how to be like Ruth to others: faithful, loyal, trustworthy and steadfast. Let's pray.

MEMORY VERSE: **Ruth 1:16** – “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.”

Reflection Questions:

1. When in your life have you trusted and followed someone? Where did you go and why did you trust them?
2. When have you faced bitterness in your life? Who helped you during that time?
3. How is loyalty and trust built in your current relationships? Is this something you and your friends need to work on? How?
4. Is Christ your Redeemer? From what has He redeemed you? How can you boldly approach the “throne of grace” in your prayers?
5. Think of someone in your life right now who has your loyalty and gratitude. Do something this week to show them.