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THAT TOY COWBOY Ruth 1

What was your favorite toy from your childhood? I was thinking about classic toys recently. There have been many toys that stand the test of time, but few decades can match the 1950's when it comes to the creation of toys. Those years gave rise to Mr. Potato Head, Silly Putty, Whiffle Ball, Matchbook Cars, Gumby, Playdoh, Tonka trucks, the Frisbee, the Hula Hoop, and of course, Barbie. Younger people might remember fondly Transformers, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles figures, *Star Wars* figures, Beanie Babies, American Dolls, My Little Pony, G. I. Joe, and one of my favorites for the toddlers, the Cozy Coupe.

Actually though I played with many of those older toys as a kid and the newer ones with my kids, none of those familiar items were my favorite. I probably used the whiffle ball than more than any of the rest of them, but it wasn't my favorite. I loved a board game called Strat-O-Matic that simulated baseball games. I thought my brother and I were the only two people who ever played it but I was surprised to learn that it still exists. You can even play it online now. But I would have to say that my favorite toy from my childhood had to be an electric train. I say that not because I used it more than any other, but because of all the toys I had growing up, it's the only one I still have. I still set it up at Christmas time most years.

I bring up the issue of toys because today I am going to use someone else's favorite toy to remind us of something we all know is important but easily lose track of in the business of our lives. Today we are going to look at a chapter from the Bible tells us a familiar story that speaks to this important lesson. The story is found in Ruth 1.

IT STARTED AS A STORY OF DISASTER

We only have a general idea of the historical setting of this story. The opening verse tells us it happened in the days when the judges ruled Israel. That was a period between 1400 B. C. and about 1050 B. C. During that time Israel went through repeated cycles of religious unfaithfulness and resulting judgment and misery. That judgment and misery would usually come in the form of oppression by an invading foreign power. A heroic "judge" would come along and rescue Israel, but then it would lapse back into its unfaithfulness again and the cycle would repeat.

Once in that period there was a terrible recession, the worst since the Great Depression. It was so bad that one family realized they wouldn't survive where they were. They had to leave what had been the land of milk and honey, a place called California, to go to a place where the economy offered some opportunity to earn a living, a place known as Texas, which by all reports was faring better in those difficult economic times.

All right, it wasn't a recession, it was a famine. And they didn't move from California to Texas, they moved from their Israeli hometown of Bethlehem to the neighboring country of Moab. But we understand the effect. We have had, and continue to have, dear friends in our church who have had to leave the area because the bad economy is making it impossible for them to live here.

A famine is worse than a recession. When there is a famine there is not enough food and people could die. A typical cause of a famine was drought, something familiar to us right now. No rain meant crops would die. If the crops died there was going to be no food. I saw an article in the newspaper last week informing us that we are in a bit of a famine. The drought has ruined crops with the result that we are going to be seeing significantly higher food prices shortly.

However, my guess is the cause of that ancient famine was not drought. The family in question moved to Moab, which is to the east of the Dead Sea. That area is even more arid than Israel. If there was a drought in Israel Moab would not be the place I would expect better conditions. It surely would have been affected by the dry weather pattern and would have had an even tougher time producing food. So my best guess is that the famine resulted from the repeated invasions of the land that wreaked havoc on the economy. Crops were stolen or destroyed, infrastructure was ruined, devastating the economy. Judges 6 describes this. A neighboring tribe called the Midianites kept raiding and oppressing Israel. Judges 6:3-4 says, "Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys." I suspect this sort of havoc was behind Israel's famine and that's why Moab was not affected. They weren't invaded.

Curiously, Moab itself was one of the nations that caused the problems. Judges 3 speaks of an occasion when Moab put together a coalition of tribes with the Ammonites and Amalekites and they invaded and oppressed Israel. It is possible that the story of Ruth took place during a period of détente between Moab and Israel so that the Israeli family would be allowed to go to that sometime enemy

tribe, or it may be that their willingness to go there despite the animosity they were bound to face was a measure of their desperation.

The head of the Israeli family in question was a man named Elimelech. His name means “my God is King,” suggesting faith in Israel’s God. The ancient Jewish rabbis built quite a story around him. They pictured him as a powerful man in Israel who thought he should be king and that when he was not recognized as such he got his nose out of joint and left Israel for Moab. The only problem is that the evidence they build this legend from is flimsier than wet toilet paper. The evidence suggests that he was just an average man desperate to save his family from starvation.

Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, whose name meant “pleasant,” had two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. Elimelech died, probably only a couple of years after he moved the family to Moab. Naomi was left with her two sons. If you were a Hollywood producer you would make a story about how when the two boys were grown they fell in love with a couple of local Moabite lovelies, but that’s not how things happened back then. Marriages were arranged by parents. That’s a custom I felt for a long time when my kids were younger that we parents should never have let get away from us. However, at this point I have to say that I am awfully happy with the spouses my children managed to find on their own, so I’ve revised that opinion. I think they’ve done better than we could have done for them, though the process was fraught with some stress and peril along the way. Anyway, it is possible that the two boys asked mom to get these two ladies who had caught their eyes, but we don’t know that. Nevertheless, Mahlon and Kilion married Oprah Winfrey and Ruth. No wait, that’s not right. It wasn’t Oprah, her name was Orpah, a completely different lady.

This is where the story really goes south. The names of the boys turn out to be significant. Mahlon meant “sickly” or “sickness” and Kilion meant “failing.” Uh, yeah, nice names. Who would give such names to children? The ancients had a different view of names than we do. They were more fluid about them. People actually might be given new monikers that reflected their character or events at various times in their lives, sort of like nicknames today. This is why you see some variation of names of individuals in the Old Testament. You see this when Jesus chose to call one of his disciples Peter instead of Simon. Simon was his given name, but what do people know him by? Peter.

So my guess is that the names of Mahlon and Kilion came about as a reflection of their health, which evidently failed. We don’t know what caused it, maybe their

health had been ravaged by the repeated cycles of oppression and famine when they were growing up, but both men died after they had been in Moab 10 years. Neither of them had fathered kids, so that left Naomi, Orpah and Ruth, all without any means of support.

The ancient semitic cultures were very patriarchal. Women had exactly zero status. They were not allowed to own land, and land was the source of wealth in that day. The only way they could own land was through husbands or sons. Had Mahlon or Kilion had a son that son could have owned land. But with no men in the family there would be no land and no money.

This is the disaster in the story. The women are now all widows. In addition to dealing with their loss and grief they were looking at the grim prospect of destitution and utter dependence on the charity of others, which was basically non-existent in Moab. At this point Naomi hears that the economy in Israel has improved. Things have stabilized and there is food in the markets. Naomi still wouldn't be able to own land in Israel, but she did have family there that might take care of her and there were laws given by God that were still respected that made provision for widows, at least to some extent. So Naomi decides to head back to Israel.

IT BECAME A STORY OF DEVOTION

Naomi's two daughters-in-law want to go with her. Let's be clear on what was happening. These two young women choose to move to a foreign country with their *mother-in-law*! Insert your favorite mother-in-law joke here. Maybe it's "What do I do if I miss my mother-in-law?" "Reload!" Laurie never thought of herself as a mother in law, but like it or not, she is one. She desires fervently to not be a monster in law. Obviously mothers in law have a less than sparkling image in our culture. I don't know what it was like back in Naomi's day, but I am surprised by the choice of these two women to stick with their mother in law.

The story is familiar. Naomi tells her two daughters in law that they should not accompany her. Unless she was one of those mothers in law who despised the girls her sons married so she wanted no more to do with them, which seems highly unlikely in this story, this was a noble act on her part. Life would be more difficult for her alone, yet she sought what was best for the two girls even though it would be harder on her.

Naomi says, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant

that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband” (verses 8-9). Their best hope for a future was to remarry. But their chances of that were much higher in Moab than they were in Israel. In Israel they would be outsiders, foreigners from a pagan people. The historic animosity between the two people groups would make them even more suspect in the eyes of eligible Israeli men.

The two women insisted. Weeping, they refused to budge. They would stick with Naomi. But the older woman stood her ground. She outlined how much harder things would be for them in Israel. If they went there all they would do is share her fate, which she felt was a disaster. At the end of verse 13 she says, “the Lord’s hand has gone out against me.” The implication is “don’t stay with me because it will only be bad since God seems to be against me.”

Orpah is finally convinced. Though it was not her first choice, she turned away in tears and returned to her people and her family. But Ruth would not give up. She was sticking with Naomi, no matter what. In verses 15-17 she says some of the most famous and touching words from the Old Testament. “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”

Wow. What faithfulness and commitment. Ruth’s dedication to her mother in law was unshakable. How do you think that felt to Naomi? An awful lot bad has happened to her. She’s like that guy in the cartoon that walks around with a cloud over his head. But Ruth insisted on sharing that cloud with her. So the two women return to Bethlehem. The whole town takes notice of their arrival. Can this really be Naomi? She’s been gone ten years. We didn’t think we’d ever see her again. There you see the flexible name thing again. Naomi says, “Don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara.” It means don’t call me pleasant, because that is far from what my life has been. Call me bitter. That’s a good description of my life. At the end of verse 21 she says, “The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune on me.”

That’s a sad summation of her life, but it’s hard to argue with her. She had to leave her home because conditions were so bad. Her husband died, then both of her sons did the same, leaving her grieving and hopeless. I’d say she had been served a very healthy plate of bitter indeed. But note the little statement right at the end of the chapter. They arrived in Bethlehem “as the barley harvest was beginning.” That is a signal that her life is about to take a turn in a much more positive direction. The harvest plays a role in the joyful events that are about to occur and pre-figure a harvest of joy that Naomi and Ruth are about to experience.

IMPLICATIONS

Here is the question that rattles in my head as I think about this story: Why did Ruth do it? Why did she stick with Naomi?

BECAUSE OF HER LOVE FOR NAOMI

Remember the reasons Ruth would have had for not going to Israel. She was going to have to live in what was essentially a foreign culture. The ancient Jews were unique even then. A few years ago I participated in a wedding for a young man who had grown up in our church and his bride. The wedding occurred in Colorado. The young woman our friend was marrying was a very devout Messianic Jew. She and her family believe in Jesus as their Messiah, but they are devout Jews. So the wedding was a mostly Jewish wedding. I was one of four men who performed the wedding. There were two Rabbis, a Cantor and me. It was a unique experience because the traditions were not my traditions. The rabbis and cantor wore yarmulkes, but I didn't. This led to a conversation with the MOB (mother of the bride) who was very much the classic Jewish mother, in which I had to point out to her that tradition actually wasn't biblical. I sort of went with the flow on most of it as they did the smashing of the glass and the bride circling the groom, the signing of the kettubah, the cantor sang in Hebrew, and of course at the reception there was the singing of *Hava Nagila* and the dancing of the Hora. I thought they were never going to stop that song. My point is that it was different and foreign for me, and that was one little thing. Ruth was going to have to go to a place that spoke a different language and had a totally different view of the world and of life, had different values and a wildly different moral code. Let's also remember that she would be viewed as an outsider and would not be particularly welcome in her new home. She would experience racial prejudice. There would be a different religion to deal with. To top it all off she was going to face almost certain poverty.

Despite all of that she stuck with Naomi. There is no way you can read this story without seeing that a big part of the reason Ruth insisted on staying with Naomi was her love for the woman. Be clear that **Ruth gained no advantage from staying with Naomi**. It was much to her own detriment. It would have been more advantageous for her to stay in Moab, but she took the more costly route because she cared so much about this woman.

Observe in verse 9 the first time Naomi told the two girls not to come with her they wept aloud. Why would they cry? The normal reaction would be to be relieved of what could have been a difficult burden to bear. Whew, great I don't have to go live in Israel out of a sense of obligation to my widowed mother in law that I'll have to support. The loud weeping tells us that it was emotionally painful for Ruth

to part from Naomi. It would have broken her heart. When Naomi insisted the girls turn back you see it again in verse 14. "At this they wept again." When Oprah left Ruth didn't just stay there. The passage tells us she "clung to her."

Down inside every single one of us there is a desire to be loved like that. Life is hard, but what a difference it would make if there was a person standing with us saying, "where you go, I go, where you stay, I stay, and where you die, I will die." We long to know that there is one person in this world who is on our side and will stick with us through thick and thin, no matter what.

Proverbs 17:17 says, "a friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity." You find out who your real friends are when the bad stuff hits the fan. Just hearing those words, "a friend loves at all times" creates a ping in our hearts, a response. We all want that. We want somehow who loves us so much they will always stand by us. They're on our side, always in our corner. It is painful to learn that such friends are about as rare as gold nuggets just lying on the ground. Which is to say that most of us have been disappointed because we long for that person to stand with us through it all, but everybody seems to be so pre-occupied with their own lives that they just can't be bothered.

Look at the familiar stories that we enjoy. Batman has Robin. The Lone Ranger has Tonto. In the *Lord of the Rings* Frodo has Sam. Starsky has Hutch. Murtaugh has Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* movies. Rizzoli has Isles. Everybody longs for a sidekick. Oscar winning actress Anne Hathaway confessed, "Loneliness is my least favorite thing about life. The thing I'm most worried about is just being alone without anybody to care for or someone who will care for me"

It's nice that you have lots of friends on Facebook. But we all long for and need friends won't "unfriend" us with a click of a mouse button. We long for someone who will stand with us when it seems like the whole world is against us, who will believe in us when everyone else thinks we're useless, who will weep with us when our hearts are breaking and will be so thrilled they can't contain themselves when we have victory, who will rejoice when we are blessed. Naomi had a sidekick, a faithful companion. Ruth made a total commitment to the older woman, even to her own detriment. Nothing was going to dissuade her from that devotion.

Jill Severson's mother and father have been married 62 years. They live in an apartment at an assisted living facility. Her mother has Alzheimer's. Her dad had his voice box removed and can barely speak, but he cares for his wife whom he loves. Jill says her mother's condition gets worse in the evening. She gets

disoriented and demands to be taken “home,” even though they are home. Her mom gets upset because she forgets what has happened to her husband’s voice and is angry when he doesn’t speak. She demands, “Why won’t you talk to me?” and when he shakes his head to indicate he can’t she gets angrier. She complains that he never talks to her, she accuses him of being selfish, uncaring and calls him hurtful names. Jill’s Dad’s eyes mist over, but he bears it because he knows that she’s scared and confused, and it breaks his heart. Finally she’ll decide that she could spend the night in the place. She calms down and goes to get ready for bed. She returns to say good night, now in a more sane and sweet frame of mind. She comes close to her husband, puts her face a foot from his and says, “Do you have something to say to me?” He mouths, “I love you.” She replies, “I love you too,” and goes to bed.

A friend loves at all times. But friends that love like that a truly rare, and more precious than the finest gold or silver.

BECAUSE OF HER LOVE FOR GOD

There’s another really important aspect to this. Ruth said, “Your God will be my God.” Yes, the Jewish people had lots of strange traditions and practices, many of which were part of their religion. Ruth was willing to accept it all because she had come to believe in Naomi’s God. She was making the hard choice to convert to a different religion that had a totally different belief system.

Ruth had been raised in the religious environment of Moab, which was polytheistic and somewhat superstitious. They worshiped the sun, the stars, nature itself. But their chief god was named Chemosh, whose name meant destroyer. He was a pretty angry god who seemed to have a lust for human blood. Part of the worship of Chemosh involved human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of children. It was a degrading religion with healthy doses of immorality, brutality, fear and superstition. When Ruth learned of Yahweh, the one true God, who is a God of goodness, righteousness, love, grace, compassion and justice, who valued every human life and sought to limit the injustice and inhumanity of the human race, she had found a God she could love. She had found the true God. In Ruth 2:12 Boaz said to Ruth, “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” People knew that Ruth believed in and trusted in the God of Israel.

A big part of the reason she was willing to make that change was what she saw in Naomi. Where did she learn about the God of Israel? From Naomi and her family. We can see it in this passage. Observe some things about Naomi’s faith in God.

Naomi believed in a sovereign God. She believed that all that happened in her life was under the control of God. She said, “the Lord’s hand has gone out against me.” She did not believe that the deaths of her loved ones that left her alone and grieving were beyond the reach of her God. She believed it was within his ability to change. That he did not felt to her like God’s hand was against her.

She states in verse 21, “the Lord has afflicted me.” She saw his hand in all that had happened to her. She had a big God. In verse 21 she called him the Almighty. This was not some regional deity or some little god who had control over the day or the rain or some other aspect of nature but not others. This was the Almighty, the one who has power over all that exists.

In 1 Chronicles 29:11 we read, “Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours.” Everything in heaven and earth is God’s and he rules over all of it. 1 Samuel 2:6-7 says, “The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts.” God is involved in all of it. Jesus would later say that even when a simple sparrow falls to the ground God knows about it and is involved in it. Naomi correctly knew that the God of Israel is the King of all that exists, that he is all knowing and all powerful, that he is involved even in the smallest part of our lives. Nothing ever happens that God is not sovereign over.

Yes, but wasn’t Naomi saying that this God of hers isn’t to be trusted? Doesn’t she see him as powerful but mean? Hadn’t he treated her abominably and wasn’t she bitter toward him? In verse 20 she said, “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.” It may sound that way, but I don’t believe that’s the whole story.

Do you think Ruth would be anxious to trust this God if what she learned from Naomi is that he is powerful but cruel? Had that been Naomi’s message Ruth would have said, “I will go where you go and your people will be my people, but, um, I’m going to pass on the God thing. I think I’d like to avoid your God at all costs.” This suggests that Ruth saw in Naomi love for God even though God had given her a rough road to walk.

Second there’s something crucially important to see in this chapter. Yes, Naomi is open about the difficulty God had allowed in her life. That’s just being honest. It would be absurd to say anything else. But I believe Naomi’s tone was more like that of Job when he suffered enormous loss yet said, “the Lord gave and the Lord

has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.” I think she was like Job when he said, “Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?”

Why would I think that? Because God is still very much a part of her thinking. She still has a high view of him and calls him the Almighty. But the biggest indication is in verses 8-9. She told her two daughters in law, “May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Do you see what that means? She still believes in the kindness and goodness of God. She still prays that he will show kindness to those two young women. She is still looking to see his goodness in this world, even if it had seemed missing in her life. She was still living by faith in God even in the middle of her own loss and grief! In 2:20 after learning of Ruth’s positive encounter with Boaz Naomi responded, “The Lord bless him!” She still believed in a good God who blessed!

Can you imagine what a powerful statement Naomi’s faith made to Orpah and Ruth? In the face of so much grief Naomi was saying to them, “God is still here. He is still Almighty. And he is still good and kind. He is still to be trusted, and I am praying and trusting him to show both of you his kindness and goodness in your life.”

APPLICATION

HAVE AN INSPIRING FAITH

Bill Fix is a pastor in Michigan. He talks about his mom who grew up in poverty. She and Fix’s dad were poor, his dad worked two jobs to keep them afloat. His mom worked just as hard taking care of the family. She had such an up attitude, a faith in God and a joy in each day that the kids never really knew they were poor. She constantly hummed and sang as she went about her days. Then came the day when they learned the devastating news that she had terminal cancer. But his mother just went on humming. She told Bill that this world is not her home, that she had a home in heaven that she would be going to where she would be just fine. Bill wrote about her, “I saw a beauty in my mother that I had never seen before. In her affliction she had become radiant.” His mother’s example of faith is a big part of why he is a pastor today.

You and I have the opportunity to lift the people around us, to give them hope and encouragement. We can do that by living out a faith in our Lord that sees him at work in all of our lives, that may even receive bitterness, but that still believes in the kindness of God, still trusts that he is good. If our faith is only good for those

times when life is easy, how will it ever strengthen and inspire anyone? What will inspire is when in the middle of darkness we are radiant in our Lord.

People all around us are looking for something real, for someone who is aflame with passion. We have the opportunity to inspire them with our faith in a God we love and trust absolutely. Only such an unshakable loyalty and trust, such a great love, can inspire them. Let's live that kind of passion and faith out.

We want God to make our lives a nice, smooth freeway. When we hit potholes and rough pavement we ask "why God?" We begin to pity ourselves, get grumpy, discouraged, depressed, and question whether God is to be trusted. Here's an important question: do you think most people have a nice smooth road all their lives? The answer is that they absolutely do not. They feel at times the world is against them. More than a few times they have felt that God is against them, if he exists at all, which they doubt. What they need is inspiration and hope, but they can draw none from someone who never faced a single struggle.

What they need is to see people who have gone through and are going through the most fearsome of terrors and handle it all with grace and patience and hope, and most of all, with rock solid trust in God, giving thanks even in these things. Jim McGuiggan wrote in *Celebrating The Wrath of God* (p. 65) that in the most difficult of times we need to decide "We won't join the peevish deserters who serve God as long as they see him as the best meal ticket in the universe." We should be the people who will say, "Here is one person who believes and will not be shaken. Here is one person who knows God is good and will die for him.

HAVE AN ENDEARING LOYALTY

In the movie *Toy Story 3* Andy, the boy who owns all the toys who are featured in the movie, grows up and is going off to college. He chooses to give his collection of treasured toys to a young girl named Bonnie. He brings a box full of toys to her house, and one by one takes the toys out and introduces them all to her. Jessie the Cowgirl, the T. Rex dinosaur, the Potato Heads, Slinky the dog and Buzz Lightyear, the coolest ever. But the last toy is his cowboy, Woody. Andy says, "He's been my pal as long as I can remember. He's brave like a cowboy should be. And kind and smart. But the thing that makes Woody special? He'll never give up on you – ever. He'll be there for you, no matter what."

Ruth was that kind of friend to Naomi. We need friends who will be with us when we are at our worst, our lowest. Laurie and I spent a night in a hotel this week. We were exhausted but were awakened out of a sound sleep by a voice saying

something about evacuation. It said they were investigating the alarm but if we chose to evacuate we should use the stairs. What alarm? We heard no alarm. What good is an alarm you can't hear? Such an alarm doesn't do any good at all. That's the same value we find in a friend you can't count on when you are at the lowest point. We don't need friends so much when we are on top, cruising with no difficulty in sight. We need friends most of all when we are hurting, when we have failed, when others have abandoned us.

I read yesterday in the newspaper a story that mentioned something that happened to Padres second baseman Jedd Gyorko. In the off season he signed a large contract. Unfortunately this year he has been awful. He has looked hopeless as a batter. On Thursday he had a brutally bad game. He failed miserably at the plate and made two awful errors in the field in the first inning. It lead to a blowout by the Marlins, whom the Padres were playing. After the game center fielder Cameron Maybin sat down next to Gyorko in the locker room, put his arm around him, consoled him and encouraged him. Gyorko needed a friend, and Maybin was that friend for him.

All of us long for a friend like Woody, someone like Ruth. But we don't control that. What we control is ourselves. And what we can learn from Ruth is that God wants us to be a person like that. Are you that person your spouse, your family, your friends can count on to be there, no matter what? Who do you know who knows absolutely that you're in their corner, and that where they go, you go?