Well, this is it…my very first opportunity to offer a reflection here at Westworth as your minister. I’m not nervous at all… Well, hardly at all…

Okay, I’m really nervous but only because it is hard to undo first impressions and so I really want this first sermon to go well.

But I am also really excited because I have been meeting with Westworth folks for a couple of months to do transition work,

And now things are finally real. Whew.

But what to preach on?

Sure, sure, I could stick with the lectionary and preach on the scripture assigned for today but honestly, that felt a bit boring, and to be truthful, some of the “Ordinary time” scriptures we find in the summer can be either really heavy or really boring. Yup, I said it. So I decided instead of stressing about what to preach, I would reach back to a sermon series that I offered several summers ago on one of my favourite books of the Bible: the book of Ruth…

The lectionary has Ruth buried deep into Ordinary time,

With Ruth 1: 1-19, and Ruth 3: 1 to 4:17 showing up on Propers 26 and 27 in year B. Basically, Ruth pops up for two Sundays every three years,

It’s like a Ruth taster. There’s so much to think about to reflect on in Ruth that it needs more time than that… Like a four-week sermon series focused only on it. So here we go.

When David and I were married twenty-one years ago, we chose to have a passage from Ruth read during the wedding ceremony.

We chose it because we like the loyalty, dedication and deep love

that Ruth showed for Naomi, and we admired Ruth’s willingness to go against the grain of social custom in order to truly live out that love.

Ruth’s steadfast love for Naomi which in Hebrew is called ***HESED***.

But we will unpack that word in a little bit.

As any good preacher does, I dug into commentaries and theological websites looking for scriptural wisdom and interpretive gold.

Unexpectedly, the more I read the more I found myself questioning my choice of preaching topic. It wasn’t that I stopped liking Ruth or Ruth’s story. It wasn’t that. Her story, the joys, and challenges of all of it, is inspiring. My problem was that to preach on the Book of Ruth,

I would have to figure out how to explain *HESED*,

*HESED*…A steadfast, unwavering love, God’s love which is embodied in Ruth. Ruth expresses it so eloquently to Naomi, offering us, in the reading of the Book, a glimpse of God’s *HESED* for us. It’s not an easy, straightforward word to define.

So to start I did what any preacher in 2023 worth their weight in salt would do: I consulted Wikipedia…

***Chesed*** ([Hebrew](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language): חֶסֶד, also [Romanized:](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanization_of_Hebrew) *Ḥeseḏ*) is a [Hebrew](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_language) word that means 'kindness or love between people', specifically of the devotional piety of people towards God as well as of love or mercy of God towards humanity. It is frequently used in [Psalms](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalms) in the latter sense, where it is traditionally translated "loving kindness" in [English translations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Bible_translations).

In [Jewish theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_theology) it is likewise used of God's love for the [Children of Israel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_of_Israel), and in [Jewish ethics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_ethics) it is used for love or charity between people.[[1]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesed#cite_note-1) *Chesed* in this latter sense of 'charity' is considered a virtue on its own, and also for its contribution to *[tikkun olam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tikkun_olam%22%20%5Co%20%22Tikkun%20olam)* (repairing the world). It is also considered the foundation of many religious commandments practiced by traditional Jews, especially interpersonal commandments.

That totally makes the meaning clear, right? *HESED* is about love.

For some reason, after reading this, I got to thinking about those bracelets that used to be popular with people of faith… The ones with WWJD on it? What would Jesus do? The question was supposed to guide our decisions and our actions in the world…But then I got to wondering: what if it was WWRD…What would Ruth do?

Ruth would be Ruth as she encountered the challenges of life in Biblical Israel. Ruth would be Ruth…But could I be like Ruth?

Whoa….

I am not sure I could be like her…Could I live Ruth like? What would that mean? Could I make the same choices and take the same risks as Ruth? Now, I want to make one thing perfectly clear…My doubt is not a reflection of the relationship I had with my mother in law. It is more a questioning of whether or not I had it in me to love another so completely that I was willing to shuck the social conventions at the time and risk being pushed out of community.

I got stuck on the question of: what if I can’t stand by you, with you, or for you, whoever or whatever the “you” in question is. What if I can’t, even though I am supposed to, expected to or obligated to?

The more I thought about this, reflecting on my response, and looking at the story through my own lens, the more I found myself siding with Naomi and her reaction to Ruth during their conversation about the future and about the daughters in law returning to their family homes.

I imagined Naomi looking sharply at Ruth, brow furrowed with confusion and concern, responding to Ruth’s decision with: “Are you crazy? You can’t be serious about tying yourself to me – with no husband, no sons, no security. You need a normal life, Ruth. You need to go home. Living with me, your mother-in-law is going to make it hard for you to start over.”

Naomi wants nothing more for Ruth and Orpah to live full, secure lives, safely tucked away in financial and social success. I could hear Naomi continuing with Ruth, saying:

“Don’t you know where your worth lies? It isn’t with me! Not here in this place! Go home to your family. Get married. Have children. Live into your worth.”

Now, there’s a reason the book is called Ruth rather than Naomi.

Ruth’s loyalty, her dedicated love of Naomi, her *Hesed*, gives us a glimpse into God’s heart. Her love lets us connect with, and possibly name the places and times when we have felt this very same love, where we have, ourselves, expressed this kind of love.

But, I wonder how things might shift if we took the focus from Ruth for a moment and focus our attention on Naomi instead. Could we place ourselves in Naomi’s shoes? How would it feel to be Naomi as she reaches her limits with Ruth and confesses that she got the short end of the stick in life, and that she had not planned for a life that included the death of her two sons AND her spouse. Can we place ourselves in her desperation as she looks at her future, and then hears that Ruth wants to stay with her and her only response is:

“But I have no worth! Who is going to love me now? I am not meant to have love or grace or blessings, I am not worth being loyal to.”

I am not worth being loyal to. My heart breaks for Naomi with those words. Her reality going forward is defined by the constraints placed on her by another…The other who has decided that her worth is tied to childbearing and male relatives. Naomi wants to shrink away, to not be a burden to anyone, and she doesn’t want to drag her daughters in law into this kind of harsh living. She simply cannot see any other future for herself, can’t imagine more…But she can for these two young women.

Naomi helps us see that so much of where we locate our worth is in expectation. So much of where we find acceptance is when OTHERs determine that we are acceptable, that we fit in. How often do we find ourselves defining ourselves through the images of another?

We construct our identity based on the expectations of society. We find ourselves believing our worth can be decided by those who think they know us. Naomi puts us face to face with those moments when any sort of living out your hearts desire is immediately shut down by those who have or want to tell you how to feel or how to act.

Those times when your truth has been determined by a so called “truth” from the outside world. Those times when you feel empty, and you are vulnerable to the voices of the world convincing you that you are not enough. Naomi gives that a voice: To name when we have lost everything that mattered or everything we thought mattered and can’t figure out how to make the switch. To name the unbearable minutes and seconds when you sense that who you are and who you could be is slipping away through your fingers. To name when you are being pulled apart and when you can see the pieces of you drifting away.

So, we focus today on Naomi, who is able to name her emptiness, her bitterness, her pain. At the very least, Naomi calls it what it is – unfair. But, I want you to be clear about something – Naomi isn’t some weak, pathetic character meant to make someone else look stronger.

She is not a foil to Ruth. She has the courage to say, boldly:

“This sucks. I am alone in a new land… My husband- dead, my sons -both dead, my daughters-in-law looking for support. What do you expect me to do? Rally? Stiff upper lip it? Think about silver linings? How dare you ask that of me?”

As much as Ruth loves Naomi, as much as Ruth shows unparalleled loyalty, as much as Ruth gives up what her life could and should be for Naomi, that does not make it any easier for Naomi to see herself worthy of that kind of love,

That *Hesed*.

What if today- and if not today but some day that will come –

is the place and time when the only thing you can say about love is that you are not worthy of it? What if you’ve convinced yourself

Like Naomi has, that you are not worthy of *Hesed*…

A love that is rooted in kindness and compassion, given by loved ones and by God? What if in that moment, no matter how hard it might be, you take a minute to listen… To listen for that voice that is so easy to drown out. It’s the voice that whispers by your ears softly saying:

“Do not push me away.

You are so worthy.

I will go with you.

I will stand beside you.

I want to be with you.

Wherever you go,

I WILL go;

Where you lodge,

I will lodge;

You are mine.

Who you are

Who you have been,

And who you will and can be,

I love,

With my whole heart,

Forever and always.”

If you take a moment to simply absorb this limitless truth, to open yourself to this divine truth, even if it is just fleeting seconds, then maybe you, maybe all of us, might be like Naomi, surrounded by and supported by *Hesed*, by an unearned, unlimited loving kindness that reminds us that we are indeed worthy.

Worthy of love, and worthy of loving.

Amen.