

## GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

### Ruth 1:1-18

The book *Far above Rubies*, by Cynthia Gallagher, tells the story of a woman, “Tante Soof,” or Sophie, who marries a Jew and adopts his six daughters. Her own mother tells her that she is making a serious mistake, but you know how that goes. Very few people marry well according to their mothers. Sophie marries Jan and not only adopts his children but falls in love with them, so much so that when their names appear on the list to go to the Nazi camps, she makes a rather abrupt decision to go with them. “What else can I do? They are my daughters; they cannot go alone.” What follows is the story what happens to them in the camp – the abuse, the cruelty at the hands of the Germans. All these details of oppression are linked to details of heroism, because, in spite of the circumstances of their life, Sophie and her family live lives pleasing to God. Did they make it out of the Concentration camp? No, they did not. But they lived right, and they lived well. They did not confuse the important with the unimportant: they chose God – not Mammon. They chose the better part.

Our Scripture account this morning of the life of Ruth – her faithfulness to her mother-in-law and ultimately to God – is another example of someone choosing God over worldly goods. I would imagine most of us here this morning are familiar with the story of Ruth. It is the story of love, of faithfulness and of an unusual relationship between a woman and her daughter-in-law. Just out of curiosity, how many of you women, if widowed, would follow your mother-in-law? Now don’t get me wrong, I have known many fine, fine mothers-in-law and I did love mine; but if you asked me the same question, I would honestly have to say no.

It seems fitting on this day which we recognize the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the Armistice signifying the end of WWI, that we take a look in the Old Testament for the true heroes, or in this case heroines of the faith. Generations before the birth of Christ we find this story of a unique relationship of two women related solely through marriage. We read of their loyalty and love for each other in spite of their dire circumstances.

When it comes to describing generations, we Americans, thanks to Tom Brokaw, use the adjective “Greatest” to describe the men and women who braved the Depression and fought in and prevailed during World War II. Think G.I. Joe and Rosie the Riveter. They were a tough and courageous generation, some of whom we celebrated earlier in our recognition of our Veterans. Did you know that we “boomers” those of us born between the years of 1946~1964 do not carry the same stellar reputation of Brokaw’s Greatest Generation? For some reason, Boomers have been considered to be self-absorbed, childish, selfish, noisy and materialistic. I do know that as children with parents who had survived the depression, many of our parents were determined that we would never have to go without like they did and consequently may have gone a bit overboard in protecting and sheltering us from difficult times. But these insults are way off base according to Leonard Steinhorn, author of *The Greater Generation: In Defense of the Baby Boom Legacy*. “Boomers deserve credit for a whole range of positive changes in American life. Environmental protection. Improved race relations. Women’s liberation. Tolerance, openness and

equality — these are all legacies of the baby boom generation”. Steinhorn, a professor at American University, argues that our country is far more open, inclusive and equal than at any time in our history, and he gives boomers credit for these positive changes. Baby boomers are, in his opinion, *The Greater Generation*. Not just Good. Not simply Great. They are, he says, “Greater.” I am not sure I agree with Steinhorn, because I believe every generation has the potential for greatness. About women, Steinhorn writes that “the baby boom era has been one of breathtaking change — in a single generation; American women have affected one of the greatest social metamorphoses in recorded history.” Goodbye, Donna Reed. Hello, Condoleezza Rice; Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Maya Angelou...etc.

Of course, the women born between 1946 and 1964 were not the first generation to experience and create breathtaking change. Open the pages of the Bible, and you will find women in both the Old Testament and the New who shattered traditional expectations and moved with the liberating power of God into a new and even more faithful future. Look at the story of Ruth in the Old Testament, and at Mary in the New. They were the boomers of their era. And both were part of a Greater Generation.

The story of Ruth begins with a family of Israelites facing a time of famine and making the decision to move away from the little town of Bethlehem. When you think of this famine, think of the Great Depression of the 1930s. It’s truly ironic that this family has to leave Bethlehem, which literally means “House of Bread.” The mother in the family is Naomi and she travels with her husband and two sons to the land of Moab in search of a better life. Naomi’s husband dies there, but her two sons marry Moabite women —Orpah and Ruth. After about 10 years, both of the sons die childless so Naomi is left with only her two daughters-in-law.

You might think of Naomi as a member of The Greatest Generation, struggling to make it through the Depression, while Orpah and Ruth are the baby boomers in this story. Naomi is a stranger in Moab – she has no blood relatives to care for her. Naomi realizes that her best bet is to move back to Bethlehem where she can rejoin her extended family. She begins her journey with Orpah and Ruth, but then senses that these Moabite women will have a better chance at remarriage if they return to their homeland. “Go back each of you to your mother’s house,” urges Naomi. “May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me” (Ruth 1:8). Naomi knows that her relatives in Bethlehem have a negative view of immigrants — they don’t pay their taxes, they bleed the welfare system dry, they take jobs away from Jews, and so on. Some things never change, do they? Deeply entrenched prejudice about race and ethnicity is an ancient emotion, and multiculturalism has not yet become a movement in Judea. So she sends her beloved daughters-in-law away, because she wants them to be spared this kind of discrimination. Surprisingly, Ruth clings to Naomi. Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and returns home, but Ruth refuses to budge. “Where you go, I will go,” says Ruth to Naomi; “where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (v. 16). (Homiletics Magazine, 2006)

What a bold and faith-filled statement this is! This baby boomer named Ruth turns away from a culture where she has family and turns toward a culture in which women are considered to be

nothing without a husband. She refuses to be intimidated by a town that is full of racial and ethnic prejudice. She commits herself to moving in a new direction, trusting completely in Naomi and in Naomi's God — the God of Israel. The God of Israel smiles on Ruth's determination to follow Naomi to Bethlehem, and in time Ruth meets and marries an Israelite named Boaz. Together, they have a son named Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David. Ruth contributes to the bloodline that will eventually produce the baby Jesus, a child in the house and lineage of David. Ruth is faithful to the God of Naomi, and great is the faithfulness of Naomi's God to Ruth.

Notice that this branch of the family tree begins not with pure Israelite blood and not with traditional practices in the little town of Bethlehem. Instead, it starts with the bold and daring faith of a foreigner, a Moabite woman named Ruth, and with her determination to embrace the God of Israel and make a bold journey to a new and better land. God is far more tolerant, equal and open than we often understand God to be, and we can give our ancestor Ruth a great deal of credit for this understanding.

I am always a little amused with the realization that most Christians are so resistant to change. How can you possibly read the Bible and not be gob-smacked with a God who is constantly creating new realities? Let's fast-forward to the New Testament, to the story of Mary's visit with Elizabeth. Mary has just received the news that she will become pregnant with Jesus, the Son of the Most High, "and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:32). Mary knows being pregnant without the benefit of marriage is not a great career choice, but she refuses to say no to this opportunity to be a servant of the Lord.

You can think of Mary, like Ruth, as a baby boomer — a member of a generation not afraid of taking risks and making changes. Mary goes with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she finds her older cousin Elizabeth, a card-carrying member of the Greatest Generation who is miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy, and Elizabeth cries out, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (v. 42). There is no generation gap to be found between Mary and Elizabeth — both come to see that they are on a journey of faith together, one that's leading them into a future that only God can create.

When people are walking this path, there are no Great, Greater and Greatest Generations. There is only one generation — the people of the One Lord God. This group is not divided into old and young, black and white, male and female, American and immigrant. It does not make distinctions between liberals and evangelicals, Protestants and Catholics, singers of praise music and hummers of hymns. Instead, this group is made up entirely of people who have discovered the truth of Mary's song of praise: God's mercy "is for those who fear him from generation to generation" (v. 50).

God's mercy is for those who fear him ... those who respect him ... those who honor him ... those who are in awe of him ... those who follow him in complete and total trust. Fear in this case

has nothing to do with being shocked, startled, squeamish or scared. Instead, it has everything to do with standing in awe before the One Lord God, maker of heaven and earth, the One who loved the world so much that he sent his only begotten Son.

We are one generation: God's Generation. Together, we should be open, equal and inclusive of everyone who trusts the one Lord God and believes in his Son Jesus Christ. There should be no generational barriers between those who fear the Lord and follow him. In fact, there should be no distinctions between those who are willing to abide by this simple formula: Fear God, and follow Jesus. Yes, it's that simple: Fear and follow.

There was a time, writes Leonard Steinhorn, "when women were told to stay home, blacks and minorities were told to stay separate." But in this new time, this time of God's Generation, the only instruction is to fear the Lord, and follow Jesus.

There was a time when those who marched to a different drum "were pretty much told to stay silent," says Steinhorn. But in this new era, we welcome every voice that wants to join in praise of the God who sent Jesus to save us. Every voice is welcome, and every voice is needed: Moabite and Israelite, male and female, Red State and Blue State, young and old and middle-aged.

As the one people of God, there's only one way to be: open, equal, inclusive. As the one people of God we are called to build the Kingdom of God on earth; as the one people of God we are called stop the hate; stop the intolerance; and most of all as the one people of God we are called to live a life that is totally pleasing to our Maker. Since I began this message with a story from WWII – and this is how we will close on this Armistice Day:

During the war a man died and two friends desperately wanted to give him a decent burial. They found a cemetery in a nearby village. It happened to be a Roman Catholic cemetery and the dead man had been a Protestant. When the two friends found the priest in charge of the burial grounds, they requested permission to bury their friend, but the priest refused because the man had not been a Catholic. When the priest saw their disappointment, he said they could bury their friend outside the fence. This was done. Later, they returned to visit the grave, but they could not find it. Their search led them back to the priest, and of course, they asked him what had happened to the grave. The priest told them that during the night he was unable to sleep because he had made them bury their friend outside the fence. So he got up and moved the fence to include the dead soldier. In Christ, we are all made righteous before God. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. (Colossians 3:11).

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.