

## The Gift

The words that I have just read have become a lesbian standard. I have probably heard them read at every lesbian holy union that I have attended for the last fifteen years. Is that a bad thing? No, because in all honesty, even though this really is not about a lesbian love story, I believe that with these words, God wanted to give us a blueprint for how relationships should be. But there is more to the story than just these words.

Before we really look at the text, there are a few things that we need to know. In Naomi and Ruth's time, women could not own property. As a matter of fact they themselves were considered property – either of their father's, husband's or their sons. So, if an older woman was left a widow by the death of her husband and he had no brothers for her to marry, or if she had no sons, she was really in trouble. Women were also not allowed to earn their own living. Many women who had no family or someone kind enough to care for them and take them in, found their only salvation to be in a Levitical law that stated a landowner during the harvesting season could not go through his land a second time to gather up what was missed or dropped during the first pass. That grain was to be left for the poor.

The other important piece of information is that Ruth was a Moabite woman. The Moabites were the product of an incestuous sexual union between Lot and his eldest daughter. If you remember, Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt as she disobeyed God and looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah as they were being destroyed for inhospitality. All offspring of a Moabite and a Jew were not considered Jewish until the tenth generation.

So now here are these two women. The other daughter-in-law has just left them to return to her family and we never hear about her again. Naomi is bereft because she felt that God had taken His hand of favor from her as she knows what uncertainties await her. At this moment, she has no inkling of the gift that God has given her in Ruth.

In the moment Ruth refused to return to her people, she showed Naomi love, sacrifice and commitment. At the same time that she refused to leave Naomi she made a vow to Naomi's God, the God of Abraham, that she belonged to Him and she would honor her word or suffer the severest of consequences. Because of that vow, her life was permanently and miraculously altered as well. So, off they go to return to Naomi's home – a place that we know well. Bethlehem. A coincidence? Probably not – but that is another story and another sermon. They arrive right at the beginning of the harvesting season.

This turned out to be a major blessing as Ruth would be able to go through the fields and glean whatever was left behind by the workers. The landowner, Boaz, an older man, was a man of means. Most of the books that I used in my research said that means he possessed wonderful qualities. He also by chance was a relative of Naomi through her late husband. When he saw Ruth, he knew who she was. The gossip mill had burned up the area talking about the young woman who sacrificed her life for her mother-in-law. This impressed Boaz a great deal so he gave his workers orders to deliberately drop grain on the ground for her to pick up and they were not to harass her in any way. Ruth was able to gather about a bushel of grain that would feed both her and Naomi for about ten days. In addition, Boaz included Ruth at his table during the midday meal.

When she heard about the days events, Naomi thought that just maybe Ruth had found herself a husband. Later, Boaz was to be out in the field late at night and Naomi told her to remove his outer garment in order that he would awake and speak to her and to lay at his feet.

Now guys, please know that I love you all dearly and I have a great time hanging out with you but laying at the feet of an old man – especially one I don't know very well, is NOT my idea of a good time. But Ruth did what she was told. When Boaz awakened, he was startled to see someone at his feet. Once he realized it was Ruth, he was willing to give her all that she asked because she had chosen him over other men. He accepted all that she had to offer but since there was another man in town who was a closer relation to Naomi he wanted to do things the right way and give him the right to refuse Ruth. Fortunately he did so and Boaz and Ruth were married. When their son Obed was born, Ruth took the infant and laid him in the lap of Naomi and said here is your child. All of the women of the town recognized that Naomi had been redeemed through the kindness of her daughter-in-law and her husband's kinsman. The interesting thing is that Obed, was the father of Jesse and Jesse was the father of David – the most influential King of Israel and the tenth generation law was never enforced. Fourteen generations later another “King of the Jews” was born out of that direct lineage – Jesus of Nazareth.

In choosing the God of Abraham as her God, Ruth opened the door for a series of events to occur that would provide for her and her mother-in-law. She gave of herself in love and sacrificed her life and in doing so received another one in return. That life became one of honor and grace.

The other night, I took a client to a Chinese restaurant for dinner. As I read my fortune cookie, I could only smile and think to myself – God you are always there when I need you – for the fortune read: “To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift.” How appropriate, for this sermon and for our lives. God calls us to give our best to those around us – no matter how they treat us.

Like Ruth as a Moabite woman, the GLBTQ community is a people scorned by much of society. We are looked down upon and denied equality because of whatever sexual sins they believe we have committed. But also like Ruth, we have an option. Remember how Ruth made a vow to God as she and Naomi were on their way to Bethlehem? We have that same option. John 3:16 and 17 states: For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Once we make that vow and choose Christ, we instantly receive the protection and favor of the Most High God. To be honest, I personally know that that protection and care was there before I ever actually chose Christ, because I believe that Christ chose me first and then drew me to him through the various paths that I chose in my life. There is no other way that I would have overcome alcoholism and cocaine addiction and lived to tell about it. There were way too many nights that I spent in blackouts behind the wheel of a car. The thought that I could have killed not only myself but someone else causes me to cringe and say a prayer of thanksgiving almost twenty years later. It is important that we give God our best – so that we do not sacrifice the gift of renewed life in Christ that He has given us. What does that mean? It means that in all things, in all our dealings with those around us, friend, family, loved one and even foe, we must seek the guidance of God when interacting with them. I have seen the most

amazing things happen when someone goes to God in prayer over a situation or relationship and then gets out of the way and lets God handle it. No matter the outcome, whether we see the blessing or the lesson right away, we are shown favor in the eyes of God and the best results occur. Now, I have to admit that getting out of the way is not always easy. I know way to often I like to get right back in there and say: “ok God, you just aren’t working fast enough for me. I will take over from here and when I think I have made some progress, I will give it back to you to finish it up.” The only problem is that sometimes God and I may want different results. God may see something out there that is better for me than what I just chose for myself... but because I took it back I created havoc in my life that did not need to be there and would not have been had I kept my nose out of it and just let things unfold like Ruth did. When I do that, I am not giving God or myself my best. My best is human best. God’s best is beyond our wildest dreams. So, while I know that we still struggle here with prejudice, bigotry and injustice God is working behind the scenes on our behalf moving things in our favor. We must be patient and wait on God. Trusting God so that the miracle will happen. We cannot engage out of anger with our brothers and sisters who believe that we are the scum of the earth. We must continue to lift them in prayer to God and respond to them in love not hate. I know that is not an easy thing I am asking – but I have been there. Several weeks ago, Gary asked if there were any people in church that have ever dealt with ex-gay ministries or programs. I have. Shortly after I got sober, I went back into the closet and renounced who I was born to be because I had no one to guide me through the “so-called clobber passages” used so often to condemn us. It took me four years to climb out of that pit, but when I did, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was a child of the Most High God and loved by God as Jesus was and is. For why else did Jesus die on that cross – except for the fact that God loved us. It did not matter that I was asked not only to leave the Healing Ministry that I was working with or the church I had been a part of. God had and still has bigger and better things in store for me – just as He has for each and every one of you. We just have to give our best and we will not sacrifice the gift. That gift is an ability to rise above our circumstances and live in love, respect and harmony with those around us – however they treat us and I believe that when we can do that, they will see that we are children of God just like they are. Once that happens, who knows what miracles will occur.

Before I close, I would just like to say that I am thrilled that Gary has agreed to supervise my pastoral internship and that the MOT supports him in that decision. I am also touched that many of you have received the news on a positive note and welcomed me with open arms. I promise that with the love and grace of Jesus Christ, I will give you my best in order to not sacrifice the wonderful gift that I have been given. Amen.