

## **2021 11 07 – Chesed**

**Ruth 1:1-18** (The Inclusive Bible)

How many of you looked at the title of today's sermon in the bulletin and wondered if the spell-check function had stopped working? How many of you proceeded to Google it to see if it was a real word? Today's reading comes from the Hebrew Scriptures and so I took the liberty of using a Hebrew word for the title on my reflection. In case you're wondering, it's pronounced Hesed and it means "steadfast love."

The story of Ruth is one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible. The book of Ruth is quite short and very readable. So I invite you all to read to the end. But this morning we are going to focus on the beginning, on the first eighteen verses. The story opens with Naomi, Elimelech and their two sons escaping the famine in Judah and fleeing to the far off region of Moab. As refugees, they arrive in a land with a different language, culture and religion. Soon after their arrival, Elimelech dies and then about ten years later their sons, Mahlon and Chilon, die as well.

Naomi is left alone except for her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. All three of them are now widows in a time and a culture that is cruel to unmarried women. In the Hebrew culture, if a man dies, then his brother automatically takes his newly widowed sister-in-law as his wife. But, as Naomi points out, she has no other sons to take on this responsibility and she's not about to give birth to any more. These three women are truly alone in the world.

Naomi, has nothing to offer Orpah and Ruth, and so encourages them to return to their own families, and to find new husbands. It is obvious, that she cares for them deeply and wants them to have full and productive lives. Naomi convinces Orpah to go, but Ruth refuses to leave. She says,

“Where you go, I will go:  
Where you lodge, I will lodge.  
Your people will be my people,  
And your God, my God.  
Where you die, I’ll die there too  
And I will be buried there beside you.  
I swear—may YHWH be my witness and judge—  
That not even death will keep us apart.”

These famous words are often spoken or sung at weddings. Many people don’t realize where they originated, that they come from this story, that they were first spoken by Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

They are words that speak of a love, a caring, a loyalty that goes way beyond romantic love or even sisterly love. The Jewish people call this love, chesed. It is a word that is found over and over in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is often used to describe God’s love for us, for humankind. But in the story of Ruth, it describes the steadfast love between two women.

At our bible study this week, we talked about where we can find examples of this type of love and one person shared a news story that they had heard earlier this week on CBC. Here’s the beginning of that story:

A small group of people slowly gathered in the mostly empty Thunder Bay International Airport in northwestern Ontario this week.

They made small talk as they waited for the arrival Wednesday night of the man they all worked tirelessly to bring to Canada.

Passengers from the second last flight of the night trudged off the plane.

Robin Rickards, a veteran who served three tours in Afghanistan during his 11 years with the Canadian Armed Forces, stood a bit away from the group, waiting.

Finally, the man he'd spent years trying to bring to Canada walked through the doors with a smile that could be seen through his mask.

With more than a dozen family members surrounding him, Abdul Jamy Kohistany hugged his friend.

"Hey brother."

"How are you buddy?" responded Rickards. "It's been a long journey man. A long journey."

People clapped and shook hands.

"It is really an unforgettable moment," Kohistany said.

After a decade of frustration and fear, the Afghan translator who worked alongside Rickards since his first overseas deployment in 2006 was safely in Canada, with hopes of living in Thunder Bay permanently with his family.

"I could never even think of this [happening]," Kohistany said. "We were struggling for years, [Rickards] especially, he was pushing the government to make it happen."

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/rickards-unites-with-afghan-interpreter-1.6229387>

Stories of war are often filled with examples of chesed, with examples of love, caring and loyalty. Robin Rickards, never gave up and, as a result, his dear friend, Abdul, is now safe in Canada.

One religious scholar suggests that the story of Ruth demonstrates three different characteristics of chesed:

1. The first is that chesed, is expressed primarily through actions rather than words or emotions. Yes, Ruth spoke some beautiful words to Naomi, but she backed them up by walking with her to Bethlehem in Judah.
2. Second, chesed love cares about the needs of other people. In this story, Naomi, thinking of her daughters-in-law, implores them to stay in Moab and remarry, but Ruth, thinking only of Naomi, chooses to travel with her.
3. Finally, chesed is demonstrated through devotion that goes above and beyond what is expected. Ruth demonstrates that devotion when she leaves her family, her country, and her faith to follow Naomi.

<https://sarahbowler.com/2014/11/20/3-characteristics-of-hesed-love-in-the-book-of-ruth/>

I would suggest that Robin Rickard's story demonstrates all of these same characteristics: the use of actions rather than words, caring about the needs of others and going above and beyond what is expected.

To me, one of the most fascinating things about both of these stories is that the individuals who demonstrate chesed are from different countries, cultures and religions. Often it is difference that keeps us separate and even makes us enemies. But in these stories, chesed goes beyond difference to discover shared humanity.

Jewish scholars argue that chesed is actually the antidote for fear and distrust. Instead of anger and separation, we can choose connection, understanding and empathy. Instead of judging or criticizing those who are different, we can choose to reach out with kindness and support. Chesed includes such actions as giving to the poor, offering hospitality to strangers and making peace with our neighbours here and around the world. <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/258311?lang=bi>

It is possible to love in this way because God loves us first. When we choose chesed then we put into practice the love of YHWH, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being. May it be so. Amen.