

## Skeletons in the Closet

*Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17*

We all love to hear about skeletons in the closet—of other people!

Strom Thurmond, radical segregationist, after his death at age 100, it comes out that he had fathered a secret child, a daughter, conceived out of a relationship with a *black* servant-girl when he was twenty-two and she was fifteen. Oh my, skeletons in the closet!

There is actually a web page called “The Skeleton Closet” where you can get all the dirt on all of the Presidential candidates of any given year; and, let me tell you, there’re a lot of bones in those closets!

Maybe there are skeletons in *your* closet, too – secrets, mistakes, embarrassing family members. Skeletons in the closet!

George Bernard Shaw once said, “If you can't get rid of the skeleton in your closet, you'd best teach it to dance” – which brings us to the Old Testament book of Ruth!

Everybody loves the story of Ruth. It begins with a Jewish family leaving their hometown of Bethlehem because a terrible famine has swept through the land. Elimelech and his wife Naomi take their two sons and go down to Moab to start a new life. While there, the boys meet two beautiful Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. They are smitten! They fall in love. They get married, and life is good until one of those tragic turnarounds comes along. The swine flu or some other terrible epidemic sweeps through the countryside and the three men die. The three women are left as widows—Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. Knowing that the only place she can survive is back home among her kinfolk, Naomi decides to go home to Bethlehem. She blesses Orpah and Ruth, telling them to go back to their own families and get on with their lives. Orpah leaves, but Ruth will not go. She speaks to her mother-in-law Naomi those famous words that are often read in wedding ceremonies today: “Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you. For whither you go, I will go, where you stay, I will stay; your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Lovely words, beautiful sentiments of commitment, and if there are any folks here today who haven't heard the story, these are very special words to Bob and Jane Puckett. They were living over in Norris, Tennessee, serving the Community church there after having lived for quite a few years in Buffalo, New York. One day, Bob received a letter from a search committee in Buffalo asking if he'd be interested in returning to that area to serve their church. Bob called Jane on the phone and read the letter. “What do you think?” Bob asked. Jane said, “Well, Robert, I've always been like Ruth: “whither thou goest, I will go”; but I ain't gonna whither back to Buffalo!”

Back to the Bible: The story of Ruth is cherished because it is a story of loving devotion between Ruth and her mother-in-law. It is a touching story about the power of love when love is steadfast and true. And it assures us that love brings us good things sooner or later. And that's a good teaching, especially when we are facing moments when it would be easier not to love. But as good a teaching as that is, it's not really what the story of Ruth is about. Ruth is about a skeleton in a closet.

The book of Ruth is a type of biblical writing that is called “protest literature.” It is a kind of writing that is included in the Bible to counteract or counterbalance other writings in the Bible. In this case, the book of Ruth is protesting against a passage in Deuteronomy 23 that says, “No Ammonite or Moabite or any of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord even down to the tenth generation” meaning “forever!” No Moabites allowed!

In other times and places, such a law might say: “No Irish Need Apply,” “Blacks Sit In Back,” “God Hates Gays,” “The Final Solution.”

Do you hear what this passage is saying? Some people are worthy of being excluded. And the reason Moabites are not allowed? When the Israelites were making their way from Egypt to the Promised Land, they passed through the land of Moab, and the Moabites wouldn't help them. The Israelites were non-citizen aliens who wanted food and shelter and jobs, and the Moabites were frightened that this huge

stream of migrants would consume their land. In Numbers 22:4, the Moabites express their fear, “This horde is going to lick up everything around us, like an ox licks up the grass of the ground.” Get the picture?

They sound a lot like people today who fear that undocumented workers from Mexico and other places will consume all of our hard-earned resources. So we can understand how the Moabites must have felt. So they did not help the Israelites. And the Israelites never forgot. And once settled in their own land, they made a law that said, “No Moabites allowed up to the tenth generation,” meaning “forever!” And they called it the law of God.

That’s human nature, isn’t it? We take our hurts, our injuries, our self-serving values, our limited perspective on life, our prejudices, our fears, our likes and dislikes, our human opinions, even our personal tastes; and we elevate them to the level of divine law!

“God helps those who help themselves!” That’s not found anywhere in the Bible, you know, but people would swear that it is a law of God. “Clapping in church is inappropriate!” That contradicts what the Psalms tell us to do when we worship, but people would have us think it’s a sin to clap, or laugh in church, let alone sit in someone else’s pew!

Do you hear what I’m saying? We human beings try to impose our ways and thoughts upon each other by putting our own words into God’s mouth! That’s why we love to pull out a verse from here and a verse from there in the Bible to prove the point we want to make. And any point you want to make *can* be proof-texted that way! *Moabites not allowed!*

Or you can substitute the name of some other person or group of your choice to be excluded. Religious people are all-the-time-finding-excuses for making someone else not welcome at the table of the Lord. But then along comes a story like the story of Ruth, the story of a skeleton in someone’s closet!

How wonderful God is not to let sinful, human ideas even those memorialized in the scriptures go unchallenged. So God inspires some unknown author to write a story that protests against that verse in Deuteronomy 23. He or she pens a tale about a Moabite woman named Ruth. Unlike the Jewish stereotype of people from Moab that portrays them as uncaring, unhelpful, unloving folks, Ruth is just the opposite. She is the epitome of love! She does not reject Naomi the Jew. Ruth does not refuse her the help she needs. No, Ruth binds herself to Naomi. “Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following you, for where you go I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I shall die, and there shall I be buried.” Ruth gives a beautiful, loving, human face to the Moabite people. The stereotype is shattered. The conventional wisdom is shown to not be wisdom at all.

And the best part of the story is that Ruth the Moabite marries a Jewish man named Boaz. They have a son named Obed. Obed has a son named Jesse, and Jesse has a son named David, who became the greatest king of Israel!

Oh, David had a skeleton in his closet! His great-grandmother was a dirty rotten Moabite! And of course, you know that makes Ruth the great, great, great, great – and so on – grandmother of Jesus, the descendant of David! Skeletons in the closet!

So what can we learn from the story of Ruth, our spiritual skeleton in the closet? Well, first of all, from a very personal point of view, don’t let other people define who you are and how you must live. Had Ruth given in to the voices of those who saw her as “one of *those* people,” David would not have become king, and Jesus would not have been born! Instead, Ruth claimed God’s definition of herself: “your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.”

Only God has the right to say who you really are. Others may see you for some flaw in your heritage, some indiscretion in your past, some failure in your relationships, some part of your life that doesn’t meet others’ expectations, some sin or sins you’ve committed; and they will beat those things over your head until you give in to the notion that you are a nameless nobody defined by those flaws, a skeleton in someone’s closet.

But God sees us differently. God sees you as his beloved child, as one who has the potential to become all that God created you to be, as a person of worth and tremendous value – a person with a

future! And it is only when you take up God's definition of you instead of everybody else's that you can discover the full measure of the person God created you to be!

Ruth refused to be regarded as just another Moabite. She was a child of God, capable of great goodness and love! And so are you!

A second thing we can learn from Ruth is that none of us has the right to look down our noses at anybody else. There are skeletons enough to go around if that's how we want to measure other people, and to be measured *by* other people. Sandy has done a lot of work on our families' genealogies. Don't even ask! There are more rascals, unwed parents, divorces, suicides, drunks, and failures than we can count! And then there's us! And we've got our own baggage!

Of all the things Jesus taught us not to do, judging others is at the top. Why? Because God will hold you to the same standard of judgment that you impose on others. The judgment you give is the judgment you're going to get. And why is judging others such a serious sin? Because it destroys people and even nations.

So instead of looking *down* at others, look *up* to them! See them as people God created – people who, just like you, are doing their best to raise families, to find happiness, to make their way through this very challenging world.

And finally, learn from the story of Ruth that the community is strengthened when we welcome strangers and take care of people others exclude. That's one of the reasons I so strongly believe in this Community Church concept that refuses to close in on itself and to care exclusively for its own needs without regard to others, but chooses to open its arms and doors to all who would come.

I believe in a church that welcomes Moabites! So go this week, and claim your identity as a beautiful child of God! Live out that beauty by looking up to and loving others! And work hard to help us be the kind of church that understands that even skeletons in the closet have names like Ruth.

Thanks be to God!