A Covenant to Marry

Summer Quarter: Living in Covenant
Unit 3: Covenant: A Personal Perspective

Sunday school lesson for the week of August 18, 2019
By Rev. Ashley Randall

Lesson Scripture: Ruth 3:1-6, 8-12, 16-18
Key Verse: Ruth 3:10

Purpose: To recognize the risk and the reward that comes with covenantal love

A Chance to Build a Decent Life

Following the Second World War, millions of Europeans had fled or lost their homes. Some of them had immigrated from their home country. Others lived in the same area, but their homes and villages were in ruins. World leaders felt a responsibility not only to restore the political, economic, and industrial systems that had been disrupted by the years of conflict, but also to address the social and psychological needs of people who had been displaced.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was created in 1950. UNHCR was originally charged with helping millions of uprooted people seek permanent solutions for a return to normal life. The guidelines for their work were spelled out in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The bulk of the Convention was devoted to setting out the access to rights and standards governing the treatment of those recognized as refugees, so that they could resume normal lives. “The agency was given three years to accomplish this task. But as new refugee crises proliferated across the globe, the mandate was repeatedly renewed until, in 2003, the UN General Assembly made the High Commissioner’s mandate permanent.”

Prior to 1950 there was no generally accepted legal definition for a refugee. That is one of the first things the Convention addressed. “It defines a refugee as a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him – or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution.”

Allow me to quote extensively from UNHCR’s brochure, The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol:

“The 1951 Convention contains a number of rights and also highlights the obligations of refugees towards their host country. The cornerstone of the 1951 Convention is the principle of non-refoulement contained in Article 33. According to this principle, a refugee should not be
returned to a country where he or she faces serious threats to his or her life or freedom. This protection may not be claimed by refugees who are reasonably regarded as a danger to the security of the country, or having been convicted of a particularly serious crime, are considered a danger to the community.”

Other rights contained in the 1951 Convention include:

- The right not to be expelled, except under certain, strictly defined conditions (Article 32);
- The right not to be punished for illegal entry into the territory of a contracting State (Article 31);
- The right to work (Articles 17 to 19);
- The right to housing (Article 21);
- The right to education (Article 22);
- The right to public relief and assistance (Article 23);
- The right to freedom of religion (Article 4);
- The right to access the courts (Article 16);
- The right to freedom of movement within the territory (Article 26); and
- The right to be issued identity and travel documents (Articles 27 and 28).

Some basic rights, including the right to be protected from refoulement, apply to all refugees. A refugee becomes entitled to other rights the longer they remain in the host country, which is based on the recognition that the longer they remain as refugees, the more rights they need.

The 1951 Convention also recognizes that refugees have obligations. “Refugees are required to abide by the laws and regulations of their country of asylum and respect measures taken for the maintenance of public order.”

“Initially, the 1951 Convention was more or less limited to protecting European refugees in the aftermath of World War II, but the 1967 Protocol expanded its scope as the problem of displacement spread around the world.”

Today UNHCR is still hard at work, protecting and assisting refugees around the world. According to the estimates, “an unprecedented 70.8 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.9 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18…. There are also millions of stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement.”
Filippo Grandi, the current United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, issued the following statement in May of 2016:

“It is in the interests of those very governments to make protecting refugees a priority, along with resolving the conflicts that made them flee. Peace, stability and the welfare of the displaced are in the economic, social and security interests of all nations.”

Study after study – from the IMF, the OECD, the World Bank and others – have shown the economic boost refugees can bring with them if they are allowed the chance to improve their circumstances and build a decent life. Refugees can be vulnerable, but also tough, resilient and industrious. When they have the chance to participate in the local economy, both they and their host communities benefit.

Ignoring a crisis and then demonizing its victims when they are forced to move is not a proper approach. It is no easy task to deal with the millions of human beings who are forced to seek help and protection, but it is better to face that task head on, with compassion and with practical solutions. Burying one’s head in the sand won’t solve anything. Allowing people to achieve their potential will.

According to UNHCR, “We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record.” In a world where nearly 1 person is forcibly displaced every two seconds as a result of conflict or persecution, what is the role of people of faith in responding to this crisis?

**A Plan for a Secure Situation**

**Ruth 3:1-6**

When we left the story of Ruth and Naomi in chapter one, they were on the road returning from Moab to Bethlehem. Naomi, who had been the foreigner, was returning to her home. Now Ruth is the immigrant living among those who are very much aware that she is not one of them.

Naomi is recognized and welcomed back. Her family and friends listen to her story of hardship and distress. They make room for her and this young Moabite women who accompanies her.

Naomi has returned because she heard that the famine in the country was over. In fact, the barley harvest is just beginning as they get back into town.

The practice of gleaning is established in the Levitical code:

*When you harvest your land’s produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don’t gather every remaining bit of your harvest. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the Lord your God.* (Leviticus 23:22)

Naomi is poor and Ruth is an immigrant. Boaz is a wealthy, respected land-owner, and a relative of Elimelech (Naomi’s deceased husband), who is also an observant Jew. Naomi sends Ruth to glean in the fields so that they will have something to eat. Boaz notices this immigrant woman
and asks his workers about her. “To whom does this young woman belong?” (Ruth 2:5b) If she is a Moabite woman living in Judah, Boaz assumes she must be a slave. When he is told that she is the young woman who returned with Naomi, Boaz engages her in conversation. He gives her permission to return to his fields and to drink for the water jugs provided for his workers.

Ruth is amazed. “How is it that I’ve found favor in your eyes, that you notice me? I’m an immigrant” (Ruth 2:10b).

Boaz responded to her, “Everything that you did for your mother-in-law after your husband’s death has been reported fully to me: how you left behind your father, your mother, and the land of your birth, and came to a people you hadn’t known beforehand. May the Lord reward you for your deed. May you receive a rich reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you’ve come to seek refuge.” (Ruth 2:11-12)

Ruth works in the field until the end of the day and then tells Naomi about all that has happened, especially about her conversation with Boaz. Naomi is delighted to hear such good news and tells Ruth to continue to return to the fields of Boaz for the remainder of the harvest. “Thus she stayed with Boaz’s young women, gleaning until the completion of the barley and wheat harvests. And she lived with her mother-in-law” (Ruth 2:23).

When the harvest is complete, there is nothing left to glean. Naomi is aware that this is going to become a problem very quickly. At the beginning of chapter three, Naomi shares her concern with Ruth. They are in a vulnerable position, but Naomi has a plan. It is a desperate plan. In some ways it is a scandalous plan. It has the potential to be a dangerous plan for Ruth – physically, emotionally, and socially.

Naomi’s plan is for Ruth to make herself attractive to Boaz – to bathe, put on perfume, and dress in nice clothes – and then to lie down beside him after he has finished eating and drinking, “and he will tell you what to do” (Ruth 3:4c).

Ruth had promised Naomi that “wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay” (Ruth 1:16b). Her loyalty to Naomi seems absolute. “Ruth replied to her, ‘I’ll do everything you are telling me’” (Ruth 3:5).

It is also worth remembering the conversation Ruth and Boaz had in the field a few days earlier. Perhaps she is hoping that he will accept responsibility for making his wish for her come true.

*When have you been in such a desperate situation that you would take great risks in order to improve the circumstances for yourself or your family?*

**A Compassionate Response**

**Ruth 3:8-12**

Let’s go back for a moment to Numbers 25:
When the Israelites lived at Shittim, the people made themselves impure by having illicit sex with Moabite women. The Moabite women invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. So the people ate a meal, and they worshipped their god. (25:1-2)

Moabite women have a reputation among the Israelites. In some ways, Naomi had told Ruth to lean into the stereotype: “bathe, put on some perfume, wear nice clothes.”

When Boaz realizes he is not alone on the threshing floor and that it is Ruth who is there and that this Moabite woman is submitting herself to be his servant, rather than take advantage of her vulnerability he recognizes the depth of her faithfulness and pledges to do all that he can to provide for her future. He acknowledges that she – a Moabite immigrant – is a woman of great worth, and he will be her advocate in the public square (or in this case, at the city gates).

*When we see people in desperate situations what would help us move past our prejudice to see them with compassion – and recognize their worth?*

**From Covenant to Covenant**  
**Ruth 3:16-18**

Boaz sends Ruth back to her mother-in-law with a generous gift and the promise to bring her case before the council of elders. Naomi is confident that Boaz “won’t rest until he resolves the matter today” (Ruth 3:18b).

Naomi is right. Boaz presents himself as the “redeemer” for this family who has experienced so much distress. Boaz takes responsibility for redeeming the heritage of his kinsmen, Elimelech. Boaz takes Ruth as his wife, she conceives, and gives birth to a son. “They called his name Obed. He became Jesse’s father and David’s grandfather” (Ruth 4:17b).

*“Refugees can be vulnerable, but also tough, resilient and industrious.” Where have you seen the contribution of immigrants in your community?*

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