

If you know anything about my Aunt Ruth, you know she was always up to something incredibly exciting. I remember her Fourth of July firecrackers sizzling in the sultry air of her Virginia farm. My cousin remembers freshly carved jack-o-lanterns floating on her lake in the early autumn twilight. Our grandmother, whom you met in June, remembers a rebellious older sister whose unmentionable behavior in the Roaring Twenties is not fit for polite conversation!

But if you know anything about my Aunt Ruth, you know that her free spirit was equally matched by a strong devotion to the people she loved. It is called *chesed* in Hebrew. There is no good translation into English. But it means something like a “steadfast, unequivocal, never-failing, never-ending, dedicated, devoted love that will not ever quit because it endures *forever!*”

It is the basic ingredient of faithfulness. God’s faithfulness. And our own.

When a newly married Aunt Ruth got pregnant for the first time her latent *chesed* faithfulness kicked in, in full force, for the new life growing within her. It led her to give up the smoking and the drinking that had caused such a deep rift with her socially conservative parents.

When Aunt Ruth’s Depression-era income was not enough to feed her growing family, her *chesed* faithfulness showed up again in full force. It led her to cultivate a garden in the middle of the city in order to provide enough fruits and vegetables to carry them through.

And when Aunt Ruth’s husband was stationed in the Mediterranean during World War II, her *chesed* faithfulness showed up again in full force. It led her to relocate the entire family to southern France in order to keep them all as close to her husband as possible.

If you know anything about my Aunt Ruth you know that, free spirit that she was, she was equally devoted to the people she loved, with a *chesed* faithfulness that only increased the more she shared it

And if you know anything about the biblical Ruth, you know of her steadfast love, her *chesed* faithfulness to her widowed mother-in-law. In a time of famine, death, and poverty, Ruth clings to Naomi as they journey together back to the land of Naomi’s birth.

“Where you go, I will go,” Ruth says. “Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your god my god.”

As a widow herself, penniless and seemingly without hope, the biblical Ruth binds her own fate to the woman she loves and then sets off for an unknown future in a foreign land, among people who do not want her there. She is their enemy. The biblical Ruth remains steadfastly loyal with *chesed* faithfulness to her widowed mother-in-law, in the midst of their crushing poverty and her immigrant status.

But if you know anything about the biblical Ruth, you know that her steadfast *chesed* faithfulness is equally matched by her assertive cleverness, for the sake of their survival. Ruth first shows her classic initiative by recommending to Naomi that she might glean in the nearby fields during the season of the barley harvest.

As she labors long hours behind the reapers to gather leftover provisions, the biblical Ruth earns the respect of the field's owner. A man who just so happens to be Naomi's prominent rich relative. After a series of, shall we say, “flirtatious” interactions, Ruth motivates this man (Boaz) into a mutually beneficial marriage.

And then, as the biblical story concludes, Ruth's adopted God (her new, strange, foreign god) causes her to conceive a child named Obed. Which literally means “faithful one.” And that child becomes the grandfather of the legendary King David.

Not too shabby for a poor widow undocumented immigrant from a foreign, hated land! She even receives an honorable mention among the other unconventional women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus.

It is worth noting, in our own time of rabid anti-immigration focused especially on children, and in a time of escalating violence in the very land that Ruth herself traveled, it is worth noting that the faithfulness of *God* in the Book of Ruth is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Only after the foreign but faithful friend, Ruth, has shown such fidelity to her widowed mother-in-law. Only after the wealthy landowner Boaz risks his status and his reputation by welcoming Ruth into his fields and then among his staff and then into his home as his wife that the *chesed* faithfulness of God can only be birthed into the world when *we* show *chesed* faithfulness to one another.

So how might we do that, right here, right now, in downtown Troy, as First United Presbyterian Church?

As the providence of God might have it, yours truly just so happened to walk along the sidewalk outside the church offices Monday evening around 5:30, when the recycling bin filled with empty bottles still sat on the curb, waiting for pickup by the city workers. Along came an immigrant woman, speaking little English, with a basket full of bottles, taking what she could find from our recycling bins.

It is not a lot, but it is our very inadequate 21st century version of gleaning from the fields of abundance. I talked with her as best I could. I offered her food but she refused. I cannot speak for her, but I would guess this was a dignified ‘job’ for her. An honest way to earn a living, from our literal ‘trash.’

What if we, as congregation, honored this immigrant woman for her pluck and ingenuity with the same kind of *chesed* faithfulness with which Boaz honors Ruth? Bringing a few extra bottles from our own recycling bins, perhaps, from neighborhoods without such obvious gleaners and presenting them as a literal ‘offering’ of hope, trusting our ‘loaves and fishes’ God to do the rest?

It is not much, and it might not mean anything, but then again it might just mean the world. At least to this one immigrant woman who said she would come back to see what more she might glean from the fields of First United.

What kind of faithfulness is God conceiving in us? That really is the question today. What does it mean to show the *chesed* loyalty of Ruth and Boaz, the devotion of my adventurous aunt, the cleverness of our biblical ancestors, the steadfast stick-to-it-iveness of the foreign woman picking up plastic bottles from our recycled leftovers on the curb?

“Giving Birth to Faithfulness”
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
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Ruth 2:1-16; 4:13-17

It has something to do with sticking together when the going gets rough, like they do, with trusting God to provide even in our moments of despair, like they do. With showing courage and passionate risk-taking for the sake of those we love, like they do, with embracing a spirit of adventure and hope that carries us through our grief, like they do.

So let us give birth to our own *chesed* faithfulness today, with the passionate risk-taking, with the assertive daring, with the steadfast devotion of all of our Aunt Ruths.

For today's world. And for all the days to come.

Amen.