

## Foundations of a Biblical Friendship

*Ruth 1; John 15:12-17*

Faith Evangelical Free Church (Manhattan, KS)

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This morning we'll be continuing our sermon series "Alive and Well", exploring what the Bible has to say about the core relationships in our lives. Over the past few weeks we've learned a lot about singleness, marriage, parenting, and last week we talked about having a healthy understanding of our boundaries and the need to pay attention to the words we use and the condition of our hearts.

This week and next week we're going to talk about a relationship that just about everyone pursues, and is ubiquitous all over the world and throughout history...and yet is also frequently overlooked or taken for granted. Nevertheless, it is one of the most **valuable relationships we can have in this life: a really good friendship.**

Before we go any further I want to acknowledge a tension that can occur when talking about friendships: for some, this is a really hard and perhaps even hurtful topic.

I know many people here today will have friends that they've loved and lost. I know others are likely frustrated by the desire to have more friends, or even just one really good friend, yet for whatever finding friends does not come easily or naturally.

If any of this describes where you're at, then I want to be sure you hear me say that I acknowledge your struggle, and to some degree can understand or empathize with it. I have lost friends to change, distance, and death. And I have had low moments in my life where I knew I needed a friend but didn't have any around and had no idea how to "go make some."

With all this in mind, I still invite you to hear and consider God's words on friendship today and next week. The essence of friendship is connecting to someone on a heart level, and nobody knows our hearts better than our God. So there is nowhere better to turn to be heard, understood, comforted, and to grow than to our God...who, by the way, very much wants to be our friend.

Friendship is an odd biblical topic. It pops up all over the place, but is rarely directly or plainly labeled as such. To study biblical friendships you often have to look for people in Scripture who clearly love and care for each other, and yet have not official obligation to do so.

Marriages are forged through a sacred covenant, binding two people together through promise. Families are bound by direct relation. Our relationship with God is one of grace but also one of obligation; there is no other God we can worship or run to for our salvation.

Friendships, on the other hand, bring two people together who for whatever reason decide to share their inner-selves with one another. Friendships have a unique way of satisfying the longing we all have for connection and companionship. God did not create us to journey through life on our own. We need all kinds of relationships, including really good friendships.

This morning we're going to take a look at one of the Bible's more unconventional, yet beautiful and strong friendships: the one shared by two women named Naomi and Ruth.

What I hope to help you see in this story are a few foundational characteristics for biblical friendships. If we want our friendships to be rich and full and to flourish, then we will want to try and pursue some of the attributes of friendship found in this passage of Scripture, Ruth Chapter 1.

The Book of Ruth begins by telling us that the story which follows takes place “in the days when the judges ruled” over Israel, perhaps around 1100 BC. In the very first verse learn that, due to a famine, an Israelite from Bethlehem decided to move his wife and two sons 50 miles southeast, to the country of Moab.

Now for any original Hebrew reader, warning bells would have immediately begun sounding in their mind after just this one verse. All sorts of things are terribly, terribly wrong here. According to God’s laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, famine in the land of Israel was an indication of and punishment for disobedience among the people. Furthermore, Israelites did NOT move away from the Promise Land, and they most certainly did not move into the land of their enemy, Moab.

This is like watching a bad suspense movie where the clearly-disposable character decides to search the basement on his or her own, and you’re sitting on the couch shaking your head and muttering “don’t go in there, don’t go in there, don’t go in there...”

Well, the whole family unfortunately does “go in there”, and tragedy quickly follows. (Ruth 1:1-5)

*[1] In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. [2] The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon (MAY- LAWN) and Chilion (KILL-E-ON). They were Ephrathites (EFF-RA-THITES) from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. [3] But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. [4] These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah (ORE-FA) and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, [5] and both Mahlon (MAY- LAWN) and Chilion (KILL-E-ON) died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

When the story begins it seems like it will be about Elimelech -- he’s the first person mentioned and named, and all the action hangs on his decisions. We’re learning about the life of Elimelech...until all of a sudden we’re not. He dies, and then his children die, and our focus falls upon the desperate, lonely, brokenhearted Naomi.

Her name actually means “pleasant” in Hebrew, but her life has turned out to be anything but that. She has lost so much -- her homeland, husband, and sons. At this time and in this culture without any males left in her family she’s lost all financial stability and any consistent means of an income. In just a few verses we’ll also discover that Naomi is, somewhat understandably, experiencing a crisis of faith. All this loss has shaken her confidence in God’s love for her.

At this point in the story Naomi has a lot to process, a lot to grieve, and a bunch of needs to address. Maybe you’ve experienced a similar kind of situation. Life throws a lot at you all at once and it leaves you feeling lost and alone. Our tendency in times like this is to push people away and focus on fixing whatever has gone wrong. In just a moment, we’ll see Naomi try to do just that. But amidst the hardships and challenges of life, the Bible actually counsels us ***not*** to rely ***only*** on what we can do...but instead to ***also***

open ourselves up to being helped by and even depending on the people in our lives we consider our **friends**. Take a look at these verses:

*<sup>9</sup> "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor:  
<sup>10</sup> If either of them falls down, **one can help the other up.**  
But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.  
<sup>11</sup> Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?  
<sup>12</sup> Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves.  
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12, NIV)*

*"A **friend** loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity." (Proverbs 17:17 ESV)*

What the Bible teaches us, and what we'll see this morning in Naomi's story, is that **one of the most valuable relationships we can have this life...is a really good friend**.

Someone who will stick by you when you fall and do whatever is within their power to help you back up. Someone who will stay by your side when you are overwhelmed, and who will love you not just when it is convenient or easy, but at all times. Someone who chooses to be close to you, and who you choose to be close with as well.

We tend to treat friendships like optional add-on relationships that just sort of "happen" after hanging out for someone for long enough. Additionally, we tend to minimize our need to develop deeply meaningful and vulnerable friendships because of our culture's emphasis on individualism and autonomy.

What I hope to make clear today is that the Bible actually teaches something quite different when it comes to the role and importance of friends and friendships in our lives. Again, **one of the most valuable relationships we can have this life is a really good friend**.

So let's return to the text and see if Naomi finds a friend she can rely on in the midst of all this tragedy and trauma:

*[6] Then she [Naomi] arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food. [7] So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. [8] But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. **May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.** [9] The LORD grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept.*

Some time after the death of her two sons, Naomi hears that her Israel is no longer plagued by a famine and decides that it is time for her to go home. At first it appears she plans for her daughters-in-law, Orpah (ORE-FA) and Ruth, to come with her. But along the journey Naomi has second thoughts. She stops on the road to Judah and tells Ruth and Orpah (ORE-FA) to go back to their Moabite homes.

The command is not delivered out of spite or anger. It's a tender moment of love and care. Naomi reflects warmly on her time with Ruth and Orpah (ORE-FA), blessing and thanking them for the way they treated her and her deceased family members **“kindly”**.

We're going to come back this word, “kindly”, in just a moment, because it's a translation of an incredibly significant Hebrew word that means so much more than just being nice, polite, or good. The kindness these women shared, especially that of Ruth, is truly part of the very foundation of biblical friendships.

So Naomi bids the women farwell, but they are not ready to abandon their mother-in-law just yet:

*[10] And they [the daughters] said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” [11] But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? [12] Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, [13] would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me.” [14] Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah (ORE-FA) kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. [15] And she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”*

Ruth and Orpah (ORE-FA) tell Naomi they want to stay with her and continue on this journey, but Naomi again tells them they should return to their old homes and own people.

In vv. 11-13 she makes a threefold argument against their following her any further that reveals a lot about her state of mind and hurting heart. Basically, she tells them: I have nothing left to give you, I am no longer useful to you or anybody else, and God Himself is against me.

All the loss and trauma Naomi has experienced has caused her to lower her opinion of herself down to the level of, “if I am not useful to you, then you shouldn't bother being around me.”

Unfortunately, this is something we tend to do a lot in our relationships, especially our friendships. In his book *Sacred Companions*, psychologist David Benner warns that too often “[we] assess [a] friendship's value primarily in terms of its usefulness for achieving material ends (friends as business contacts) or minimizing boredom and loneliness (friends as people to kill time with).”

Benner goes on to say that according to the Bible, friendships are gifts from God. They aren't ordinary or transactional...they are divinely appointed relationships, designed to bear such fruit as loyalty, risk taking, tender devotion, and covenantal bonds.

I don't know about you, but I have definitely been guilty of both assuming my friends only want me around for as long as I am useful, and treating others in such a way that they would be led to believe such a terrible thing about themselves.

Neither are what God wants for our friendships. They are supposed to be so much more than good connections or time wasters. Friendships are part of flourishing in this life. God doesn't expect us to celebrate or endure everything on our own. We will all likely have times in our life where we feel and think

like Naomi...and when we do, I hope and pray we all have a friend around as loving and devoted as Ruth. Look at how Ruth responds to Naomi when she's at her lowest and most desperate:

*[16] But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. [17] Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." [18] And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

This is a beautiful snapshot of biblical friendship. At a difficult time in her life when Naomi needed somebody to be there for her, Ruth stepped up and proved herself to be a compassionate, loyal, truly wonderful friend.

We long for this sort of connection, this depth of commitment. It's why we write it to so many of our shows, movies, and stories. This is like Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli running off into the wilderness to save Merry and Pippin in Lord of the Rings. Or like Robert Redford as the Sundance Kid, jumping off a cliff with Paul Newman's Butch Cassidy (although admittedly they were criminals, so probably not the best friendship role models, but you get it).

The best friendships we admire and the best friendships we have are characterized by things like devotion and sacrifice, and I think that's exactly what we see going on between Ruth and Naomi, and exactly what God wants us to pursue in our own friendships too.

But how do we get to this point? What was it that led Ruth to love Naomi so much that she's willing to support her in such a radical way? I think there are at least three things we can see in this story that help us understand the relational foundation for biblical friendships.

First, long before this moment of crisis, Ruth and Naomi had built a friendship by ***sharing a steadfast love for one another***. (x2)

Go back and take a look at v. 8, where Naomi said "***May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me***". The word translated as "kindly" is the Hebrew word "*chesed/hesed*", which is one of the most theologically significant words in all of Scripture.

It appears 246 times throughout the Old Testament, sometimes to describe a relationship between two human beings (like Ruth and Naomi), and sometimes to describe the relationship between God and His people.

Here's a list of all the things the word "*chesed/hesed*" conveys: love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, covenant faithfulness...or, the common shorthand version: steadfast love.

Old Testament Scholar Francis Kimmitt also notes that "*Chesed' is not self-seeking and is not motivated by anything except desiring what is best for another person.*"

Ruth was able to be such a great friend to Naomi because they had built their friendship by sharing a steadfast, "*chesed-ish*", love for one another.

One thing I want to be sure to point out here is that we often think about significant expressions of deep love as belonging solely to the realm of family, or intimate marital relationships. And while you certainly want steadfast love to be part of your marriage and families, the Bible actually teaches that faithfulness, sacrifice, and strong love are to be a part of our friendships as well.

Take a moment to think about some of your friendships, either the ones you have now or the ones you've had in the past. Do you share a steadfast love for that person? Would you describe your friendship as being characterized by kindness, loyalty, and faithfulness?

When we raise the bar for friendships this high, chances are pretty good the number of people we feel this connection with drops dramatically. And that's okay. In our culture our "friends" are broadly understood to be people we enjoy spending time with. Those relationships are great to have.

But I want to challenge you to make sure you've got a few people in your life with whom you're willing to share a strong and steadfast love, people you intentionally seek out and connect with for more than just enjoying similar interests.

The first foundation for biblical friendships is ***sharing a steadfast love for one another***.

The second foundation for biblical friendships we see in this story is a ***willingness to let each other know how you're really feeling***. (x2)

Naomi, Orpah (ORE-FA), and Ruth are extremely honest and forthright with each other. Naomi pours out her soul, lays bear her anguish, and even comes clean about her frustration with God. In response, Orpah (ORE-FA) and Ruth let Naomi know how far they are willing to go. Orpah (ORE-FA) doesn't lie about about her own needs; she still loves Naomi but feels the need to take up her offer to return home. That's okay...sometimes friends part ways, and it at times it can be a blessing when this occurs.

Ruth, on the other hand, looks at Naomi and says, "listen, I get that things are really hard right now and that you feel like a hot mess, but I love you, I'm not leaving you, and I will do whatever it takes to stand by you."

Your friendships will be enriched by being real with one another about how you feel. That truth is all over the Bible. You can't learn to trust someone if you never give them a chance to get to know you or prove their steadfast love. If you want really rich friendships then you've got to be willing to open yourself up to others and be a little vulnerable.

When I was in seminary I was in a scholarship group with nine other guys. When we first met we were, suspicious of one another. The scholarship was really competitive and require continued academic excellence, and I have to confess (and we later confessed to one another) that there was a definite feeling of "well I'm good enough to be here, but are you" being exchanged during our first year together. We did not share steadfast love...we shared steadfast skepticism.

That all changed during our second year of school, when we decided it was time to get to know each other a little better. And since we were in Colorado, what better way to bond than to go camping? So we packed up, headed for the mountains, and spent 3 days hiking, playing frisbee, and eating nothing but ground beef and bacon. It was incredible.

But best part of the trip came late one night as we all sat around the campfire. Someone suggested we ought to share some positive thoughts about one another. So we started...and for several hours we went around the campfire, plainly telling every single guy how much we respected, admired, and yes even loved one another. We called it -- and I'm not kidding here -- "sugar lumps", we did it every year for the next three years.

Because we were willing to let each other know what we were really feeling -- how much we wanted to be friends and how much we appreciated and respected one another -- the steadfast love in our friendships increased exponentially. Those guys are still some of the best friends I have ever had. And we would have missed out on those friendships if we'd never been willing to be real and raw and vulnerable with one another.

Do your friends *know* that you care about them? That you respect them? Or, perhaps that you are worried about them and want to be there for them in their time of need? Remember this: they can't know, not for sure, what you do not tell them. They can't know what you're thinking and feeling, and your friendship cannot grow, if you aren't willing to open up.

Friendships of steadfast love aren't built on assumptions. You've got to have a **willingness to let each other know how you're really feeling**. You've got tell the people you care about what's in your heart.

Finally, biblical friendships are characterized by people **doing their best to do what's best for one another**. (x2)

Take another look at Naomi's reasons why Ruth should leave (vv. 8-15). Naomi is an old woman at this point and would have doubtless been obviously beyond the age of childbearing (and likely beyond the age of remarriage). So the argument she makes to Ruth...doesn't make much sense.

It seems likely Ruth wasn't traveling with Naomi with the secret hope that Naomi would be able find a husband, get pregnant again, and after 15-20 years raise another man that the then-aged Ruth could marry. And, as we noticed earlier, Naomi's faith has clearly been rattled as well.

Now look Ruth's response. At this point Naomi has said a bunch of things that make little sense and aren't true. But Ruth senses that what Naomi needs right now is NOT to be corrected...just supported. What's best for her friend at this point is to let her know that she's not alone. She even goes as far as to express confidence in God, even when Naomi can't muster the same faith.

Don't miss that point, because as Christians we know that what is best for all people -- friends, family, loved ones, neighbors, even perfect strangers -- is a continued, renewed, or brand new relationship with God. Ruth doesn't shame Naomi for her struggles or doubts, but she also doesn't leave them uncontested. She let's Naomi experience her pain, and offers her own shoulder and her own faith for Naomi to lean on.

Really good friends seek to do what is best for one another, even if it means patiently waiting for the right time to bring up something that's wrong. There are certainly times when you have to confront a friend and call them out -- we see that between Paul and Peter in the New Testament, when Peter is struggling to accept Gentile believers.

Whether it's patience or prudent action, the key to doing what is best for your friend is determining how to act based on their needs and what you can rightfully and reasonably take on with them.

Remember, friendships are not self-seeking. They certainly have limits and boundaries (pastor Steve talked about boundaries last week), but those boundaries are established by the extent you are prepared and called to serve, not by the extent of your selfishness.

We won't read the rest of Ruth and Naomi's story, but if you take a look at it this week you'll see that their friendship continued to give them strength, and even led them to a happy ending. Ruth supported Naomi as she processed her grief. Naomi helped Ruth adjust to her new home and new culture, and even helped set up Ruth were her eventual husband, a man named Boaz. The Book of Ruth ends with Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz enjoying their new life and their strong friendships together.

Biblical friendships are characterized by ***sharing a steadfast love for one another, a willingness to let each other know how you're really feeling, and people doing their best to do what's best for one another.***

If you're feeling overwhelmed...that's okay. The biblical standards for friendship are probably a lot loftier than our own. But there is good news: you don't have to do any of this perfectly to have great friendships.

In fact, there is a pretty good chance that you'll occasionally let your friends down, just as they will occasionally let you down too. To address that, we should take a quick look at one more passage of Scripture

See, Ruth and Boaz eventually had a son, who went on to have a son, and so on and so forth. Centuries later, Ruth's great great great great great great (and a whole lot more "greats") grandson gathered together twelve of his closest friends and shared this with them: (John 15:12-17)

*[12] "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. [13] Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. [14] You are my friends if you do what I command you. [15] No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. [16] You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. [17] These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

Jesus himself sought out and built friendships. He shared steadfast love with his disciples, was definitely willing to let them know how he was feeling, and of course did what was best for them, and for you and me, in laying down his life for us...his friends.

But here's the really amazing, grace-filled thing: Jesus offered his friendship to a group of people *he knew could not perfectly reciprocate the love and loyalty he was willing to give.*

He was friends with Judas, who would betray him. Peter, who would abandon him. James and John, who had asked to sit at his right hand but then were nowhere to be found when that hand was nailed to the cross. These are the imperfect and sinful people Jesus called friends.



And you know what his plan was to maintain those friendships? To forgive them, even after they'd failed to be there when he needed them most.

So, I guess there's a fourth foundation to biblical friendship: **friends both love AND forgive each other.** They love, and share, and do what's best...and work on forgiveness when the first three fall apart.

I have a challenge for you this week. Find one of your friends (it can be a spouse, or someone you haven't talked to in a long time, or someone you're just starting to get to know better, or someone you've enjoyed a lifelong friendship with) and...

- Let them know that you love them.
- Let them know why you love them.
- Let them know that you will do your best to do what is best for them whenever you can.
- And if necessary...forgive them, or seek their forgiveness in order to repair the friendship.

Remember, ***one of the most valuable relationships we can have this life is a really good friend.***

#### **Communion:**

As we turn now the Lord's Table, I want to invite you to do the same thing with Jesus that you'll hopefully do with one of your friends this week. As bread and the cup is passed, spend some time in prayer and...

- Tell Jesus that you love him.
- Tell Jesus why you love him.
- Tell Jesus that you'll do your best to seek after what he has taught you is best.
- Tell Jesus that you are thankful for the forgiveness that he's willing to give, and indeed has already given you.

At Faith we invite anyone has confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior to join us in celebrating communion. We will first pass the bread, and ask that everyone wait to eat together. We will then pass the cup, again waiting until everyone has received a cup to drink.