

Ruth: Woman of Faith and Grace

Ruth 1:8, 15-18

Hebrews 11:4-16

August 8, 2010

Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

Imagine you were among the early Christians, the Hebrew people persecuted for following Jesus. It was a time of crisis, maybe you were living in Rome where Christians met in secret in the catacombs underground because otherwise you would be rounded up and killed. Someone delivered a speech to lend you support. It would have been comforting to hear when you were afraid for your lives. The book we call "Hebrews" starts with such a speech or sermon and ends like a letter about keeping the faith. This Book of Hebrews in the New Testament of the Bible was originally thought to have been written by Paul, but now scholars think someone else likely wrote it. It must have been someone who wrote by faith in order to bolster others' faith.

It's interesting because the author, here in the New Testament, gives a whole lineup of Old Testament characters who lived "by faith." It's a parade of the faithful, marching through history, and through our text. They're marching to bolster the faith of those who follow, in this case, the early Christians.

Here comes the parade: Abel, then Enoch, then Noah, then Abraham--all faithful to God.

Our adult Sunday class is using a video series where a Bible professor, Dr. Lisa Wolfe, likes to use the Hebrew names of Bible characters with their English meanings—so here's this parade of the faithful—imagine them coming down the aisle...

Here we have, leading the pack,—Abel. In English, Abel's name is "**Breath of Meadow.**" He was out on the meadow with his flocks—(Do we have any sheep farmers here?) I'm guessing, those sheep didn't smell so good; I guess old Abel needed a breath of fresh air, so they called him "Breath of Meadow" or maybe they called him "Breath of Meadow" because with the stench of the sheep he had to hold his breath! Abel brought an offering to God that was his best: the first lamb of his flock. That's what he gave God because for him God came first. Of course, later we know how Cain killed his brother Abel. (Maybe he smelled bad?) So Abel did not live on to serve God in other ways. But from all we know he was innocent and faithful.

Then along comes Enoch. His name from the Hebrew is "**Enlightenment.**" (That would be a nice name to have...) They say Enoch was wise and modeled repentance. He was the great grandfather of Noah, and even three generations early he already knew about the flood—he was enlightened.

Next in line is Noah. His name is "**Peaceful Wanderer.**" Noah trusted God and took his warning about the flood to heart and built the arc. His life of faith led to saving the people we call Israel. He had to be patient and trusting of God, but finally, "Peaceful Wanderer" stepped out of the arc, onto the dry land, and there was a rainbow, a covenant from God, and peace on earth.

The last of the parade is Abraham. Abraham's name is "**Father of a Multitude.**" By faith, he left his homeland when called by God. Though they were way too old, Abraham and Sarah became parents, and Abraham continued in faith to go up the mountain obediently to sacrifice Isaac. It's a good thing at the last second a ram appeared, so Isaac lived and kept the genealogy going, otherwise Abraham's name wouldn't make any sense, "Father of a Multitude."

In each case, the example of faith starts with the words, "**By faith,**" In each case there is a turning point in the character's life achieved "by faith."

But what about the women? Weren't there any women who "by faith" made significant turns in their lives?

Ah, yes...Ruth! Finally we have Ruth, and ironically, she isn't even one of the Hebrew people—She is a foreigner, a Moabite! The writer of the Book of Ruth—I wonder if it was a woman?—this writer wants us to know that women can be faithful as well as men. And "she" wants us to know that even foreign women can be faithful. Ruth's name is "My Cup Runneth Over." Her cup "runneth over" with love for Naomi and for Naomi's God. Listen to this favorite passage from the King James Version: Speaking to Naomi,...

"Ruth said, 'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me'" (1:16-17).

This passage is often chosen for a wedding text. It describes love between two people, partners who pledge to stay together until death. In the scripture, of course, it refers to Ruth refusing to stay in Moab, her homeland, but instead choosing to go back to Bethlehem with Naomi, her mother-in-law. Naomi has lost her husband and her two sons, and Ruth insists that she will stay by her side:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God (1:16, NRSV).

I like Ruth's name, "My Cup Runneth Over." Ruth is so full of grace and newfound faith, that she simply can't stay put. She is filled to overflowing with love!

I wish I had the name "My Cup Runneth Over." It's a name of extravagant grace! (We have a Grace in our church, and we also have a Ruth!—Beautiful names.) My name, Heather, is a Scottish flower; you know, in the musical "Brigadoon," "Heather on the Hill." But it's a scratchy bush, not very lovely at all. Why couldn't I be Rose? Iris, Jasmine, or Violet? (I guess Heather is better than Hyacinth or Magnolia...but it's not nearly as charming as "My Cup Runneth Over.")

Ruth earned her name by making herself available as a vessel of God's grace. In her decision to accompany Naomi—whose name at that point in the story was "Bitter," —Ruth opened herself to God's overflowing grace. Her future was unknown, her culture was foreign, her husband was

gone, and nothing was very sure. And yet, she received God's love, and "by faith" she chose a whole new life. Perhaps the story of Ruth teaches *us* to be open to God's grace.

We stand on the shoulders of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Ruth. **By faith** they made choices and took risks. **By faith** they led others to understand God's overflowing grace.

We stand on the shoulders of the early Christians. **By faith** they met and suffered persecution and martyrdom. **By faith** they wrote down the stories that had been passed to them, such that today we have the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. And **by faith** we meet today, convinced that there is grace abundantly overflowing.

And *you* march in this parade of the faithful too. You too are descendants in the faith of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ruth, King David, and, some generations later, Jesus of Nazareth.

So I am wondering today, what do you do "by faith?" What choices do you make because of faith?

This past week I attended a conference with several hundred clergy. Each pastor has a faith story. My roommate had started out as a probation officer, and she was suddenly called to go into the ministry. **By faith**, she went to seminary, giving up her income and going into debt, moving, and embarking on an unsure path. She now serves at Sonoma UMC. She stands on the shoulders of Sunday school teachers who believed in her, on the shoulders of professors and mentors, and now on the shoulders of people in her congregation who give her insights about life every day.

You have taken bold steps in your walk with God by faith—

By faith, you have cared for a loved one, sacrificing months or years of your own life. You could have chosen another path, but you stood on the shoulders of other gracious servants and mentors in your life and you served by faith.

By faith, you have given up a job in order to pursue a passion. You could have chosen to take the safe road, but you stood on the shoulders of others who have followed a courageous path and you are living out your dream by faith.

By faith, you have found yourself wanting to be in service, and so you have volunteered to help with projects like Rebuilding Together and NOAH. You could have chosen to do something for yourself, but you have chosen to do something for others. You stand on the shoulders of famous people like Mother Teresa and Cesar Chavez, but also on the shoulders of regular people like members of St. John's, people like Marilyn Jacobi, who have made it a habit to help people in need.

By faith, you have entered into life in a new country. Everything was different—the language, the customs, the worship. But you have stood on the shoulders of other immigrants and "peaceful wanderers," and you have trusted that though the adjustments may be hard, you would have enough faith, enough of God's grace, to be courageous and to join the parade!

By faith, you have welcomed a new person into your family or a new friend into our church. Though at first you weren't sure, now you are sure. Because you stand on the shoulders of people like Ruth whose "cup runneth over," you have more than enough love and grace to accept people into your life, even people who come from another background or life experience.

By faith, you walked into this sanctuary the first time, unsure about what you would find. You were alone, new to town, perhaps without family or friends, or maybe without a job. But you stood on the shoulders of brave people who have endured rocky times in their lives and found their way into a faith community. And now you are experiencing life in this community and becoming one who offers to others a testimony of faith.

By faith, you have come back to church after losing a loved one. Your emotions are a little raw and tears are close to the surface. But you stand on the shoulders of many who know that it's perfectly okay to cry in church, that this is the very place where it is acceptable to be real, to be hurt, to be broken. This is the very place where God's love is overflowing. This is the very place where we fill our cup at the well of living water.

By faith we are bolstered by those on whose shoulders we stand. Thanks be to God for the faith that gives us grace and love overflowing.