

RUTH

Study & Vision PROJECT

RSVP(Ruth Study & Vision Project)

Intro

The book of Ruth draws us into a compelling tale of famine, loss and redemption. Indeed, it has been called the best short story ever written. In four short pages we experience a roller coaster ride of emotions as we follow the incredible destiny of Ruth and the people she encounters.

Few of us hear the name, Ruth, with the appreciation her story deserves. This extraordinary woman surges forth in the Hebrew Bible at a dark time in Israel's history - the time of Ezra and Nehemiah who wished to purify Israel and cement its ethnic identity by building a stone wall and casting out foreign women and their children from the land. But the heart of Ruth breaks down that stone wall to reveal the light of God's love that includes and embraces the least and the lost.

The powerful words and actions of Ruth resonate on a deep, visceral and very human level. They transcend time and place evoking the love we have all felt at one point in our lives for someone else. They remind us of our human connection, that we are all part of the same family and are children of God regardless of creed, race or culture. They remind us that we need God and one another - desperately - to overcome obstacles and live out the authentic values of loyalty and kindness.

At Montreal City Mission we accompany many modern-day Ruths. The refugee women who seek help at our 'Just Solutions Legal Clinic' have faced extreme hardship and tragedy on their path. They have been forced to flee their native land often clinging to the only kin they have left. It is not an easy life.

And yet, time and time again, we have witnessed incredible strength, resilience, loyalty and hesed (Hebrew for kindness). In their presence we have felt their sorrow and grieved with them, but we have also felt God's love shining through. These are usually women of deep, living faith - whether it be in Jesus, Allah or Ram. They have often told us that it is the one they call God who gives them the strength to keep going.

And so we find ourselves asking what our role is as Christians in this time and place. How are we reaching out to the stranger in our midst? In what ways are we showing hesed/kindness to the one who has been singled out as not belonging and to be excluded? How is God's all-encompassing love and redemption breaking through and working through us?

The Book of Ruth provides a unique and rich opportunity to reflect on the experience of hesed/kindness in our own lives – how we have both received and demonstrated kindness in our circle of family and friends, with the wider community and in the world. We have designed the questions to begin with individual personal experiences and then to draw on the experiences of others through story telling videos, etc. It is our hope that in plumbing the depths of this ancient tale, crucial conversations will take place, new vision will emerge and a deeper practice of hesed/kindness will evolve. (You will find a video of Diana who recounts her refugee experience on the MCM web home page under the Just Solutions Legal Clinic)

We would be delighted to receive your comments, suggestions and feedback at info@montrealcitymision.org

RSVP team: *Neil Whitehouse, Wendy Evans, Royal Orr, Paula Kline*

Chapter 1

Naomi and her family

The book opens with a bunch of family relationships, drama of travelling, settling, marrying, but then the story-teller has a different message to share than we might expect.

None of us would wish to go through the loss and suffering of Naomi. She must return home, declaring herself to be barren by God's hand. But despite her grief she has been touched, literally clung to, by the kindness of Ruth.

Ruth is an enigma. We have no idea why she is different. Why she clings to Naomi when common sense suggests the ties they have are hopeless. She places her life with her companion mother-in-law who has lost everything. Her declaration moves us.

Questions:

1. What parallels do you find in your family history or your personal life for the drama of disappointment and then surprising support?
2. What sort of explication can you offer for the courage and friendship of Ruth for Naomi?
3. Ruth clings to Naomi. Can you tell of stories in your own life or community, where actions and words went together in powerful ways? How has this shaped your faith?
4. Sadly people are still being forced from home and homeland. What would be different for Ruth as a refugee today?
5. What are some of the same issues she would face?



Chapter 2

Ruth meets Boaz

The two women set out for Naomi's homeland, joined as never before by a new solidarity. But Naomi remains concerned about how she will help Ruth – this Moabite stranger to the Israelites – integrate into her own kin. Indeed, how will they simply find enough food to eat. And further along, how will she help Ruth win over Boaz as husband. Extraordinary resilience is displayed with openness, learning and living out of faith.

Picture too the sheer determination of Ruth to work in the fields, in the margins just as she is a marginal woman. She takes advice from Naomi and again risks dishonour in approaching Boaz; a woman whose courage allows her triumph through crises.

Questions:

1. What have been your experiences of being marginal, different, dependent, new and starting from the bottom of life?
2. What were the ways Ruth was marginal and dependent? What turns out to be her strength?
3. How do we treat marginality in our communities? Do we name dependence kindly?
4. In what ways are newly arrived refugees marginalized by our society?
5. What do you think are the additional obstacles female refugees must face and what are some ways we can lighten the load of these women in our communities?



Chapter 3

Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor

Boaz holds to kinship values knowing the sad story of Naomi's loss. He is respectful of Ruth, protective without becoming possessive and finds his reward in her companionship, despite his age. It is never too late to find that kindness reaps blessings.

Questions:

1. Fill in the gaps - What sort of person is Boaz and why? Can you remember someone like him you have met and what his story was?
2. Do you have a personal story of having control over some situation and choosing to resist self-interest, choosing to exercise justice and kindness, even in a small way? What was the result, the feeling and the outcome?
3. Boaz saw Ruth and realised her difficulties from direct experience. How can we be more like Boaz? What do we need to change to have Boaz's experience? Do we rob ourselves by protecting ourselves from this sort of contact?
4. Being uprooted from one's land and community can be a traumatic experience. New immigrants and refugees to Canada must cope with many losses in addition to being confronted with unfamiliar customs and values.

Discuss some ways we can welcome the 'stranger in our midst' and help ease this transition period.

5. Ruth found she was able to survive by gleaning, making up what others left behind as useless. Can you recognise how refugees are seen as threats in times of hardship when their presence is not a drain on communities? In what ways do they contribute to the host country?



Chapter 4

The Marriage of Ruth & Boaz... The birth of Obed

The story-teller highlights the limitations of social convention or prejudice or racism at work in the hesitation of the first-in-line relative to marry Ruth. Boaz finds his kindness to Ruth brings benefits beyond expectations.

Obed the baby is born into an extraordinary story, one that he must have told many times to his son, and his grandson David. The outsider who stood by her family, and became his mother through a plot of kindness. reward in her companionship, despite his age. It is never too late to find that kindness

Questions:

1. Are you an inheritor of kindness? How?
2. Have you seen unexpected change thanks to kindness?
3. What has encouraged you to practice kindness, to go beyond social conventions?
4. What acts of kindness might be particularly meaningful for newcomers?
5. How can we create a space in our communities where kindness is both given and received?

