

Transformational Kindness

On Sunday we continued to explore what “life in the Spirit” looks like, focusing on the core characteristic of kindness, as exemplified in several stories buried deep in the Old Testament.

1. Warm-up Question: At the outset of his sermon, Pastor Chris described three great Jewish celebrations – Passover (celebration of freedom from Egypt), Shavuot [Shavu-ought] (celebration of the Ten Commandments), and the Year of Jubilee (a year of rest and restoration). In our own time and culture, which American holiday do you most love – and why?

2. Jesus was crucified during Passover. Fifty days later, during Shavuot, his disciples were huddled in prayer when they received the gift of the Holy Spirit, a day we call “Pentecost.” This past Sunday was Pentecost. So we explored the book of Ruth – an Old Testament story that Jews commonly read during Shavuot/Pentecost. Ruth’s story revolves around an old custom called the “kinsmen redeemer.” The basic idea was, if the husband of a Jewish woman died, his closest unmarried family member had an obligation to marry her and produce an heir. It was, among other things, a way of ensuring that widows were not left destitute.
 - a. Suppose we still had the same custom today. If you’re a woman, who would be your closest unmarried male relative? How would it feel to marry him?
 - b. If you’re a man, imagine if the husband of one of your sisters (or female cousins) died. How would it feel if you had to marry her?

3. Thankfully, a lot has changed since the days of yore! But if we can manage to transcend the strangeness of the “kinsman redeemer” concept, we can learn important lessons from the related stories in the Bible. There are three of them, all interrelated. Before Ruth, there was the story of Lot and his daughters. You probably know the backstory – how Lot, his wife, and daughters fled Sodom. Lot’s wife died during the escape. Lot and his two daughters ended up living in a cave in the middle of nowhere, thinking they might be the last people on earth. What follows is a strange story. Read Genesis 19:30-38.
 - a. When you read this story, how do you feel? If you were in their situation and thought you might be the only survivors on earth, would you feel a need to generate offspring by any means necessary? Why or why not?
 - b. Does the kinsman redeemer concept help explain the daughters’ decision?
 - c. Pastor Chris reminded us that, before fleeing Sodom, Lot tried to protect the visiting strangers and appease the angry mob at his door by offering up his daughters instead as sexual bait. Talk about a broken family! How do you imagine Lot’s actions affected his daughters? How do you imagine his actions affected how his daughters raised their own children?

- d. The great irony is that, while trying to be kind to strangers, Lot was incredibly cruel to his daughters. That's not uncommon. Studies show that "everyday aggression" most often targets those we're closest to and that we're often more positive and cheerful with strangers. From all this we drew a lesson: **True kindness radiates outward, affecting those closest to us first, then on to the outer circles of our influence.** Why is it harder to be kind to those closest to us?
 - e. Have you ever known someone who was publically kind, but privately mean to those closest to them? How did that affect you?
4. Before Ruth, there was also the story of Judah and Tamar. Tamar married one of Judah's sons, who then died. Judah promised he would give Tamar his youngest son as kinsman redeemer when he was old enough, but never did, leaving Tamar a perpetual widow. Tamar took matters into her own hands, disguising herself, seducing Judah, and becoming pregnant by him. Then, instead of publically shaming him, she privately confronted him and gave him a chance to protect and defend her. Read Genesis 38:24-27. Judah was dishonest with Tamar and failed to give her an honorable choice. By contrast, Tamar gave Judah a chance to come clean and do the right thing. From this we learn: **True kindness recognizes the humanity, autonomy, and choice of each person.** Have you ever experienced a situation where someone did you wrong, then the tables turned and you had the chance to get even? What did you do? What happened?
5. With the prior two stories as background, let's turn back to the story of Ruth. Like Tamar and Lot's daughters, Ruth ended up a widow. She returned to Israel with her mother-in-law Naomi and encountered her dead husband's closest unmarried relative, Boaz. When Boaz didn't act to fulfill his obligation, Naomi encouraged Ruth to do what Tamar did, disguise herself and seduce him. But Ruth breaks the script. She revealed her identity to Boaz and asked him to be her kinsman redeemer, giving him a choice. In so doing, Ruth became an amazing example of authentic kindness. She was wonderfully kind to those closest to her – her mother-in-law Naomi. And she refused to manipulate Boaz, giving him the chance to make his own decision. He then rose to the occasion and chose to fulfill his responsibility to Ruth. Fittingly, their child became grandfather to King David and ancestor of Jesus Christ. Ruth's kindness was transformational.
- a. Ruth was amazingly kind to those closest to her. Tell us about someone close to you that you feel inspired to show even greater kindness. What might that greater kindness look like?
 - b. Ruth was also kind to someone who wasn't doing right by her – Boaz. In the process, she showed us that kindness can break a cycle of bad behavior. Tell us about someone who hasn't done right by you that you feel inspired to show greater kindness. What might that kindness look like? And how might your kindness change things?