

“NAOMI & RUTH: STEEL MAGNOLIAS”

Pastor Becky Stephens

Text: Ruth 1:1-18

My favorite movie that I always try to watch around Easter is “Steel Magnolias.” The film is about the bond a group of women share in a small-town Southern community, and how they cope with the death of one of their own.

M'Lynn Eatenton, and her daughter, Shelby, are preparing for Shelby's wedding, which is taking place later that day. They arrive, along with Clairee Belcher, the cheerful widow of the former mayor, to have their hair done. Suddenly, Shelby, who has type 1 diabetes, falls into a hypoglycemic state, but recovers quickly with the help of her mother's quick thinking.

Several months pass and Shelby returns to town to celebrate Christmas. During the festivities, she announces that she and her husband, Jackson Latcherie, are expecting their first child. M'Lynn is devastated by the news, as the doctors had warned that Shelby's extreme diabetes situation means that pregnancy could be a death sentence, but Shelby, unable to adopt, was unwilling to go on without having children, calling that a “life of nothing special.” Shelby's father Drum, and her brothers Jonathan and Tommy, are thrilled. Truvy, Annelle, and Clairee had originally thought that Shelby couldn't have children, but on the night of the big announcement, M'Lynn clarifies for them the doctors' warnings. Unable to give her any words of wisdom, Truvy suggests they focus on the joy of the situation: Jackson and Shelby's first child, as well as Drum and M'Lynn's first grandchild. M'Lynn agrees, saying that nothing pleases Shelby more than proving her wrong.

Shelby successfully delivers a baby boy, Jackson Jr., but shows signs of kidney failure and starts dialysis. She celebrates the 4th of July, around the time Jackson Jr. turns one, by successfully receiving a donated kidney from M'Lynn, allowing Shelby to seemingly resume a normal life. Four months later, on Halloween, found by Jackson unconscious on the porch of her house. Shelby is rushed to the hospital, where it is determined that Shelby has contracted an infection in her central nervous system due to the suppressive therapy given to keep her body from rejecting the kidney, but compromises the immune system. The doctors inform the family that Shelby is likely to remain comatose indefinitely, and they jointly decide to take her off life support. At the funeral, after the other mourners have left, M'Lynn breaks down in hysterics in front of Ouiser, Clairee, Truvy, and Annelle, but is comforted by them.

Let's watch the clip from the cemetery.

In the book of Ruth, it seems like these women can't seem to catch a break either. These women, particularly Naomi, have suffered far more than they deserve. Plagued by famine, Naomi's husband moved his wife and two sons out of their homeland and into the hostile territory of Moab. Without getting into all the details, just suffice it to say that there was no love lost between Moab and Israel. They were age-old enemies, and only the most desperate of Israelites would cross the borders into Moabite territory. So it was that Naomi found herself in not only a foreign, but also hostile, land when her husband died. The widow now has no means, no friends, and two sons to care for. We don't really know how long they were there in this sorry state, but in time, both sons marry Moabite women. Yet they, too, eventually die. Now Naomi is not only a widow in a foreign and hostile land with no means and no friends, she also has no immediate family. All this unfolds right at the beginning of the story, so it is really no surprise that Naomi begins to question the God of Israel. Like Job, Naomi does not curse God, but she does believe that God has cursed her.

We can only imagine that Naomi must have felt as if there was nothing left to live for. So it's not really a surprise when Naomi decides to head back to Bethlehem and encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their own homes, too. Naomi has lost hope, and you can't really blame her. Where she sees no future at all for herself, she must believe that there is at least some hope for Ruth and Orpah to start life anew. But Ruth will not hear of it. As Orpah heads back to her remaining family, Ruth issues one of the most beautiful declarations of faithfulness in all of Scripture: "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."

Who could argue with that? Naomi certainly doesn't, she resigns herself to returning to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law, Ruth. And so begins Naomi's journey out of the black hole of her time in Moab and on to a new life. Even as Naomi continues to stew in her own misery, though; Ruth, in her extreme faithfulness, gets busy. She is now the foreigner in a hostile land, and she is a widow on top of that. Though she lives in Naomi's household, they have no means of support because they are both widows. They are the poorest of the poor. So Ruth heads to the fields to glean what the harvesters have left behind so that she and Naomi have at least some sort of sustenance.

Indeed, Ruth could have created an entirely different life for herself. She could have remarried and fostered a posse of offspring in her homeland of Moab. But, instead she devoted her life to Naomi, and now she is having to do the back-breaking labor necessary to keep them both alive. She was just doing what she had to do because she was a committed and faithful woman. She obviously cared about her elderly mother-in-law immensely. Who could know that her efforts would pay dividends for her, too? This is the life of faith, really. Sometimes our faithfulness means we suffer through extreme trials. And sometimes our

faithfulness means that God blesses us richly. The most important thing, though, is that we always remain faithful.

Now, despite all their suffering and sadness, Ruth and Naomi are on the road to blessing because Boaz takes notice of Ruth as she gleans his field. It seems that with her pledge and commitment to Naomi, Ruth has been incorporated into the Israelite community. We can discern this because, though Boaz is told that Ruth is a Moabite, that doesn't seem to matter to him. He doesn't view her as less of a person, quite the opposite, actually. He makes special arrangements for Ruth. She is not only allowed to glean his field in peace, without any threat from the male harvesters, but the harvesters are also to give her water if she needs it, and even some of the harvest itself.

Needless to say, this is a huge blessing for Ruth. She returns home with her arms full of grain, and we sense that perhaps this lifts Naomi's spirits after so many months of despair and hopelessness. Boaz's blessing of Ruth, his acceptance of her into the Israelite community, is enough to turn Naomi around. She can pray and praise again. It turns out that after all, God has not given up on a commitment to them. So Naomi decides to initiate something. Perhaps as a widow with no means, Naomi was trying to get positioned for a better future. Or maybe she was not so concerned for herself, but rather was trying to improve Ruth's life. We don't really know. But whatever the case, Naomi gives Ruth very clear instructions for approaching Boaz in what could at best be called a "risqué" way. Like so often in the Bible, we see the human scheming, at times even manipulation, that God somehow uses to continue his purposes in the world. Naomi instructs Ruth to dress and make herself up and to go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be that night. She is to wait until he is good and drunk and settled in, then Naomi tells Ruth that she must uncover his feet and then lay there at his feet.

Now, "uncovering the feet" of someone could mean a lot of different things. And suffice it to say, that only one meaning of that Biblical phrase literally means "uncovering the feet." This is a way of talking about nakedness or even intimate activity, and Naomi is telling to go and do these rather questionable things. I mean, how many of us would instruct any young woman to behave in such a way?!? It seems preposterous. Yet, without question, Ruth does exactly as Naomi has instructed her. Ruth has once again shown the depth of her faithfulness and character.

Certainly, Ruth's approach of Boaz at the threshing floor is quite brash. One could easily look at her actions and assume that she is nothing better than a prostitute propositioning a wealthy man. But I think there is another possibility here. I think Naomi knew it, and I think Ruth knew it. But in order to make it happen, these women had to work beyond the normal patriarchal social structure. Because I think that rather than propositioning Boaz, Ruth was doing something more along the lines of proposing to him. Simply offering him a one-night stand would be risking a future with any other man. And what we do know about both Ruth and Boaz tells us that it is unlikely that either of them would have any interest in a one-night stand

anyway. Indeed, Ruth makes it clear that she is proposing. She is taking the initiative not merely in approaching him, but in talking about marriage. Ruth is appealing to Boaz to become her protector, but she also wants to be someone he is attracted to.

And the scheme works! And what follows is another element of the unknown as Boaz goes out to find the next of kin and the village elders to verify that his plan to farm Naomi's land and take Naomi's daughter-in-law as his wife will work. We don't know if he is doing this because he is simply attracted to Ruth, or because he is in love with her, or just because he feels a sense of obligation to his relative Naomi. But whatever the case, we do get the sense that this is something Boaz genuinely wants, just as much as Naomi and Ruth. And we can even imagine that perhaps, in the background, God is at work, too, making sure everything happens just as he plans.

Because, indeed, life does begin anew for both Naomi and Ruth. Ruth and Boaz marry and Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed, though the Bible says that "a son [was] born to Naomi." The idea here, I think, is that this is God's blessing for both of them. Life goes on even when it seems as if all life has ended and all hope is lost. Ruth committed herself to Naomi, and more importantly to Naomi's people and Naomi's God. The result was that, after losing her husband and two sons, Naomi "had" a son again, even in her old age. And Ruth became the great-grandmother of the greatest king in all of Israelite history.

Back to "Steel Magnolias". In a later scene, M'Lynn begins to accept her daughter's decision to end her life in return for a few years of motherhood. Annelle, now married and pregnant, asks M'Lynn if she could name her own baby after Shelby, since Shelby was the reason Annelle and Sammy met. M'Lynn gives her blessing and assures Annelle that Shelby would have loved it.

Let's watch the clip.

Months later, on Easter morning, Annelle goes into labor during an Easter egg hunt, is rushed to the hospital by Truvy and her husband Spud, and another life begins. Life goes on.

That, I think, is the very best part of this story. Because here's what it says to me: God has a plan for his people. It doesn't matter if we are Israelite, or Moabite, or Northerners, or Southerners, or black, or brown, or blue. It doesn't matter if we've messed up in the past, or even if we try and take matters into our own hands sometimes. If we are faithful to God, then God will be faithful to us. It may not always be easy, and it may not always be pretty, but somehow, God will work with us, and because God is God, amazing things will happen!