

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, January 26, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

Ruth 1:16

“But Ruth said, ‘Entreat me not 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...’”

(Revised Standard Version)

IS YOUR FAITH CONTAGIOUS?

Christianity is always within one generation of becoming extinct, which means, of course, that every true Christian must be an evangelist - a witness for Christ by life and by lip. And if you are not a witness, then you had better reexamine your credentials as a Christian.

In this delightful Old Testament story, recorded in the first chapter of the Book of Ruth, we have a perfect illustration of personal evangelism, what it is and what it accomplishes. “Your God,” exclaimed Ruth to Naomi, “your God shall be my God.”

Why did Ruth choose Naomi’s God?

In answering that question, we shall discover the simplest and most effective way in which you and I can engage in personal evangelism in our own day and generation.

The story is cast against the background of an intense and bitter nationalism which made even religion a geographical matter. In those days, if you were born in Moab, you worshipped one kind of god. If you lived in Egypt, you had another god, or many others. And even the Jews, in those days, who believed in one God, Jehovah, nevertheless assumed that Jehovah’s jurisdiction was confined to a strict geographical area, the land of Canaan. Every country had its own god or gods. And if you changed your country, you also changed your god, because it was believed to be sound common sense to keep on good terms with the deity in whose territory you were living! People didn’t move from country to country except under dire extremity, because to leave your homeland, and go to live in another, was considered equivalent to playing the traitor. You were betraying the god of your fathers, and dire catastrophe would be your just reward.

As our story opens, there is famine in Canaan, sheep dying on the hills of Bethlehem, corn withering in the fields. Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two Sons look out across the Jordan valley to the lush plains of Moab. It wasn’t far away, only forty miles as the crow flies; but for all that, it might as well have been at the other side of the world, for in going there, they would be leaving Jehovah behind! At least that is what they believed. It was a sore temptation. Should they stay in Canaan and risk death by starvation, or make for Moab and forsake their God?

Finally they decided to go. We can picture them, the father, mother, and two sons, and

their donkey laden with their few goods and chattels, setting off eastward, skirting the northern shores of the Dead Sea, and then turning southward into the fertile, well-watered highlands of Moab. It was a total journey of about 70 miles.

But from the very beginning the venture was doomed to failure. The boys married heathen girls. The family had a rough time - ten long years of adversity, misfortune, sorrow and bereavement. Elimelech died, and then the two sons. And so it came to pass that one day, Naomi, heartbroken, looked back westward over the Jordan valley, to the hills of Bethlehem; and in that hour she made her decision. She must go back to her native soil, and to her own people; and she must go alone.

Her widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, walked with her to the river Jordan. It was quite a journey, more than 40 miles; and during that three or four-day walk they would have opportunity to reminisce about the years that had passed, the loved ones they had lost, and the hopes and dreams they had for the future. When they finally reached the river's bank, they intended to say their "tender last farewell." But when the fateful moment arrived, Ruth couldn't do it! She got her lips shaped to say "Goodbye," but it wouldn't come! She clung lovingly to her mother-in-law, and as she did, she made this most wonderful confession of love ever spoken by a daughter-in-law, some of the most sublime words that have ever fallen from human lips, words that changed the course of history, and made her name immortal: "But Ruth said, 'Entreat me not 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...'"

Why did she do it? Why did she make the momentous decision to leave home and kindred and country to cast in her lot with her mother-in-law? Above all, why did Ruth choose Naomi's God? The answer is really quite simple: Ruth chose Naomi's God because she had already chosen Naomi! That is the blunt truth of it. She accepted Naomi's God mostly because of her deep affection for Naomi. She had seen such loveliness in Naomi's character that irresistibly she had to say to herself, "If Jehovah is Naomi's God, He will be my God too!" Behind all the steadfastness, beauty and tenderness of Ruth I see, inspiring and sustaining and maturing it all, the wise, devout, loving personality of her beloved mother-in-law!

My Christian friend, that is how you too can be a personal evangelist and witness for Christ — by living the kind of life that will make someone else say, "If Jesus Christ can make him or her that kind of person, then I want to follow Christ too!"

This story of Ruth and Naomi emphasizes a truth which we don't always like to admit, namely, that we make most of our choices not with our head alone, but with our heart. Sentiment and emotion play a large part in all our decisions and conclusions. This "pure reason" we talk about is mostly a figment of the imagination. We're almost tempted to say there is no such thing as "pure reason," that is, reason divorced from emotion.

For example, I read somewhere about the president of a big company who needed a new private secretary. He decided to make the selection on purely scientific grounds, so he called in a psychologist to help him. The applications were carefully scrutinized, and finally the three girls who appeared to be best qualified were interviewed for the job. The psychologist asked each of

them the same simple question - "What do two and two make?"

The first girl said, "Why, four!"

The second replied, "Maybe twenty-two!"

The third girl, with a whimsical smile, said, "Well, that depends!"

When the girls had left the room, the psychologist turned to the president and said, "Well, there you are. In these three young ladies we have three types of mind-set. The first girl is the literalist; she said the obvious thing - 'Two and two make four.' The second girl is the person with imagination - 'Maybe twenty—two.' The third girl is the cautious type who suspects a trick. Now which type do you want?" The president didn't hesitate a moment. With a twinkle in his eye he said, "Oh, I think I'll take the blonde with the blue eyes!"

Do you suppose that you reach your conclusions with your mind alone? Of course you don't. Why are you a Presbyterian? - because you've reasoned it all out, and read John Calvin's "Institutes" from cover to cover; or because you thought your mother and father were the finest people who ever lived, and they were Presbyterians? Or perhaps you attend this Presbyterian Church because you were brought here by a friend who cares about you, and you have stayed because of the wealth of Christian love and friendship and caring you have experienced in our fellowship here. We are influenced by our sentiments far more than we know. There is an emotional content in almost all our choices.

And so I come to the greatest and grandest choice of all -- the choice of Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord. If I were to ask you the question, "How were you influenced to become a Christian?" I venture to say that many of you would speak someone's name. I know I would speak my Mother's name and my Father's, for it was in their dedicated lives that a small boy first saw the love of Christ reflected.

Never will I forget that November night, 63 years ago, when my Dad, dying of cancer at 43 years of age, called me to his bedside, and taking my hands in his, told me, very calmly, that he was going home to God. He told me how much he loved me, that he wished we could have had more time together; and he asked me to take care of my Mother, and to meet him in heaven one day. Thirty-six hours later he was gone. But his words, and his quiet courage as he faced the sunset of his earthly life, made an indelible impression upon me; and it was only a few months later that my Mother led me to accept Christ as my personal Savior. And I want to tell you — what those godly parents gave me was worth more than all the riches of this world.

Every time you think of Naomi, remember this - that she lived out her faith so winsomely in Moab that she made it easy for others to believe in her God. You see, even though Naomi had left her native land of Canaan, she had never really forsaken her God. Look at her! She had come through trouble and bereavement, and it had not made her sour or rebellious. She had accepted these heathen daughters-in-law into her home; and day by day she had shown them a finer texture of womanhood than they had ever seen before, a kindness of heart, a richness of faith and understanding far in advance of the crude religious ideas of Moab, so that at the end Ruth

could do nothing else but exclaim, “Your God shall be my God!” That, I submit, is evangelism at its simplest and its best - making your faith so attractive that it is contagious.

A Japanese girl came to the USA after the close of World War II and drifted to Chicago in search of a job. Before she could find one, she was stricken with appendicitis, and taken to a hospital. And there she was, sick, a stranger, a Japanese and former enemy of the people on whose mercy she was now cast, with no job, no money, and the future looking pretty bleak. Through one of the nurses in the hospital, a few young Christians in a downtown church learned of her plight. They visited her, sent her flowers and fruit, and when she was convalescing, they took her to their homes, and to their hearts, and to their church, where, in a warm, caring, vital evangelical atmosphere, she was personally confronted by Jesus Christ. And that Japanese girl, though brought up a Buddhist, soon decided what she would do. “If these folk are so good and kind to a former enemy, and have such a loving concern for me, there must be something in Christianity really worth having. I will indeed receive Jesus Christ and be His disciple, God helping me!” And the story of Ruth was reenacted in downtown Chicago!

It is really very simple, this business of evangelism - “Your God -- my God!” -- as simple as that, and as difficult. That is how nearly every individual is won to Christ. You meet him at the place of his need, and you let him see Christ in you, and you tell him what Christ has done for you, and then his or her response -- “Your God - my God!”

You remember what Henry Stanley said after his journey into the heart of Africa in search of David Livingstone? “I went to Africa,” he said, “as prejudiced as the biggest atheist in London... But I saw that solitary old man there, and I asked myself, ‘How on earth does he stay here? Is he “cracked” or what?’ But little by little his sympathy became contagious. Seeing his gentleness, his pity, his earnestness, I was converted by him although he did not try to do it at all!”

Are we doing that for anybody -- making our faith so contagious that they catch it? That is evangelism at its simplest and its best, and we can all have a share in it.

It was the late Dean Inge who used to say, “Religion is caught, not taught.” Every Naomi has a Ruth somewhere. You have your circle of friends, people to whom God is calling you to witness by your life and by your lips. God has made you a Naomi for some Ruth standing at the fork in the road, making up her mind about God.

A dear friend of mine in Canada, who passed away a few years ago, was a guard in one of the largest prisons in the Province of Ontario. He told me once that during his years of service in that penal institution he had seen more than 300 young men accept Christ as personal Savior through his humble witness. He kept up a voluminous correspondence with them after their release, and many of them subsequently entered full-time Christian work. He was not an exceptional man in the sense of educational attainment, but you saw him smile, you heard him speak, and you felt that you were in the presence of the Master Himself.

What about you? Have you a profound concern for those of your friends and associates who are not Christians? Or has our modern sophistication blunted your sense of concern for

those who in the words of the Apostle Paul are “without God and without hope”? (Ephesians 2:12, Living Bible). Do we pray for those people who work alongside us five days a week; do we beseech the Lord to give us the opportunity and the wisdom to speak the right word to them at the right time? Or do we just not bother? I sometimes wish that God would keep us awake nights and haunt us with the memory of golden opportunities for service we have missed.

You parents - begin by being a Naomi to your own children. Do your children know that God really matters in your life? Do you have family devotions? When did you last talk to your children about Jesus? Have you ever let them know what He means to you?

And all of you — in the office, the workshop, the classroom, the service club, wherever you meet people, let Christ live out His resurrection life through you, and eternity alone will reveal the results.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who has been giving serious consideration to the matter of making a definite personal commitment of himself to Jesus Christ. To you I say — life is a solemn business. Tremendous issues often hinge upon seemingly insignificant decisions. Small things can change the course of history. Wasn't it Pascal who said, “Had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the whole history of the world would have been different.” Indeed! Suppose President Lincoln had not attended Ford's Theatre on the evening of April 14, 1865! And suppose the radio operator on the Californian had not turned off his receiving set only a few minutes before the Titanic, only ten miles away, sent out its first SOS message on that fateful night of April 14, 1912!

And what would have happened if Ruth had gone back, said “Good-bye” at the Jordan, and returned to her Moabite gods? For remember, her sublime significance and importance rests upon the fact that she married again; and years later, one of her direct descendents was a little Child, born one starlit night in a rude stable in Bethlehem. By her choice that day at Jordan's bank, Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David, and in the providence of God, the progenitor of King David's greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! So call no decision you ever make insignificant.

Your commitment of yourself to Christ may not bring you the material blessings which Ruth's decision brought to her. Bad things often happen to Christians, and good things to the ungodly. God will never bribe anyone to become a Christian. But your act of personal commitment to Christ could mark the beginning of a chain reaction that could bring untold blessing to the world!

In the Gospel lesson this morning, we read the most sublime compliment that has ever been paid to any human being. Of Lazarus of Bethany it was said that “because of him, many went away and believed on Jesus!” (John 12:11).

May that be said of you and me too!

“YOUR GOD – MY GOD!”

AMEN.