

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
May 5 & 6, 2012
Lee Hanssen
You & Me: Submission
Book of Ruth**

I recognize that we have a lot of visitors in the house this weekend, and I want to say welcome. For those of you who may not be aware of how our student ministry program is run, these eighth grade Commitment Class students have been paired this year with leaders who are high school seniors. Some of these leaders have, in fact, not just been with your grandkids or your nieces and nephews or your kids for this year but, in fact, they have been leading them for three, four, sometimes even up to five years.

These seniors, in particular the seniors at Edina, fell victim to a series of pretty unfortunate timings on our behalf this weekend. We actually ended up scheduling this weekend on the same weekend as their senior prom. You might notice that I am wearing a tuxedo, but this is not by accident. Last night we were decked out in prom dresses and tuxedos together. I promised them when we found out about the scheduling that I would sport a tuxedo for them all weekend long. So, seniors, this tuxedo is, in fact, for you.

From time to time I run across things while I'm driving around or watching the news or seeing a movie that seem a little out of date. When I look at them, I scratch my head and think to myself, really? It is 2012, what are you doing? Maybe you've been to Pennsylvania or down South and you've seen one of these on the road. (*Slide of Amish carts shown.*) Not the most efficient mode of transportation on earth. I don't even know if you are going to know what this next thing is, but it is called a pager. (*Slide shown.*) When I was your age I had one of these, and I clipped it to myself. People would call this thing, and it would buzz and display a phone number. Then I would go to a pay phone. You probably don't even know about payphones where you put quarters in and dial the number to call these people back. Or who could forget Zubaz? (*Slide shown.*) As I look at these, I get so excited because you know that they will come back soon. They will come full circle. They will be back. When we are out in the world, and see these things that sometimes seem outdated and seem irrelevant, and as I stick my nose in the Word and read the Old Testament stories and hear the writings in the New Testament, there are things in church that seem a little outdated to me as well.

This morning I want to talk a little bit about the idea of submission, this concept where we would yield ourselves to the power of an authority, the idea that we would allow ourselves to be subjected to some sort of a treatment or even maybe defer to someone else's judgment or opinion or decision. In Ephesians 5 in the New Testament, the apostle Paul urges believers to give thanks to God as we submit to one another out of reverence for Jesus Christ.

Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,²⁰ always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

We see submission *all* over the Scriptures. I don't know about you, but that sounds awful to me, and here is the problem. At the end of the day, outdated or irrelevant, I want to do what I want to do. I love myself way more than I love anyone else in this room. My thoughts sound really great to me. I am not a betting man but this is the weekend of the Kentucky Derby, so I would bet that there might be one or two of you in this room who share similar sentiments. Maybe you hate being told what types of music to listen to or not to listen to as your parents have your best interests in mind. Or, heaven forbid, maybe you have been asked to shut off your cell phone because your parents want to have a face-to-face conversation. Or maybe you have been asked to spend a weekend with your in-laws when you have had something else planned that sounded more exciting to you but you know in your heart that it would bring your spouse great joy. Or maybe you have been around here awhile, and we are asking you to submit to the greater vision of the church as we tweak ever so slightly the styles of worship to connect with the broader audience.

I set out two months ago to preach out of the Book of Ruth. It sounded like a great idea at the time to preach on five chapters of an Old Testament Book over Commitment Class weekend. Being vaguely familiar with it, I said, "Yep, I'll use Ruth as a perfect picture of submission," and I figured as most uneducated men on the subject of submission, that Ruth was going to be my go-to text, and in so many ways, it really was. But it also became such a surprise to me as I saw the different pictures of submission and surrender, not just from Ruth, but from an elderly woman and widow named Naomi and a powerful, well-respected man named Boaz. What I actually began to see as I studied further was a story about three people who never knew Jesus' name, but whose words and actions spoke unmistakably about who He was. And so instead of trying to squeeze in an in-depth sermon that covers the entire Book of Ruth, I want to simply peek into a few small windows that I believe point to each one of us in this room. While all intertwined at some level, I believe that each one points to a unique picture of submission that has a message for us today.

I'd like to begin by walking you through the events of the Book of Ruth. We find ourselves in this Old Testament story in the midst of an unfortunate family dynamic. There was a man named Elimelek--say that one fast three times--and he was married to a woman named Naomi. They found themselves in a foreign land called Moab. Moab was a pagan culture with many, many gods. It was not God's country. It says that they had two sons, and these two sons took foreign wives. It doesn't tell us how or why or what had happened but this woman, Naomi, finds herself in a foreign land and loses her husband. In the process, she doesn't just lose her husband, but she loses both of her sons as well.

She hears that God is indeed providing for and taking care of His people back in Bethlehem, so she takes her two daughters-in-law and sets out for Bethlehem in hopes that she can start life anew. On the way she stops and tells her daughters-in-law, "Don't come with me. This road is going to be long, and it is going to be hard." She says, "Go back. Go back to what you know. Go back to what is comfortable. Start over." One of the daughters-in-law, and you can't blame her, does that. She goes back. But enter Ruth. In a bold moment of faith, Ruth stands up and declares to Naomi, "No, I am going to go with you."

¹⁶ *But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."*

And in a newly-formed alliance, Naomi and Ruth make their way to Bethlehem. We find ourselves in the reality that God is indeed providing for His people. It is the beginning of the harvest. Ruth has pledged her life to Naomi and wants to take care of her and provide for her, and so she goes out and begins to work in the fields. We find in the story that Ruth isn't just in the fields working, she is working hard. She is sweating it out.

Boaz enters the story. He comes to the fields that he owns with his servants and all these people and inquires about this woman who has caught his eye. The people share with him that they have heard of this woman. Her reputation is spreading throughout the land because of her allegiance to Naomi, her faithfulness, and her hard work. Boaz doesn't let her work in his field and allows her special privileges. He takes care of her. He invites her to stay in his field to protect her. That evening Naomi meets with Ruth and shares with her a plan. Recognizing and understanding the law that, in fact, her late husband's relative could be legally responsible to take her family under their wing, she presents an opportunity to Ruth. She comes up with a plan that sounds a little bit weird and a little bit crazy. She invites Ruth at the end of the harvest season after Boaz has had a good yield, has celebrated and is in good spirits, to sneak into his house late at night and not in a promiscuous way but to lie at the edge, at the foot of his bed. It was actually a way to propose and suggest marriage when he wakes up and finds her there in this state.

So this girl, Ruth, who isn't much older than these commitment class students today, in an act of great submission, does what she is told. She goes and finds herself at the foot of Boaz' bed. Boaz upon waking up in the middle of the night to an intruder, a foreigner, a Moabite woman, doesn't get angry, doesn't kick her out, doesn't become defensive, but sees an opportunity to submit to God's greater plan to serve each other, to look out for the best interests of another. Although it turns out he is not legally responsible for this woman, he wants to make things right and do the right thing. The next morning he goes to the town and through a series of events ends up taking Ruth as his wife and becomes her redeemer.

Now through all the twists and turns of that story, the highlight for me comes at the end through all these seemingly small, insignificant acts of submission that we see all through the story from Naomi, from Ruth, from Boaz. The story ends telling us the family line of Jesus. All this series of events has led up to Boaz and Ruth having a son whose name is Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, who brought on the family line of Jesus Christ.

As I think through the different people in the story and the different ways that they submitted, I want to invite you to walk through each one with me to try to find yourself in the midst of this story. As I look at Naomi, I see such a beautiful picture of submission through pain. Here we have a lonely widow, a woman who knows what it is like to have everything. She had a husband, two sons, daughters-in-law. She had a family, possessions. At one point in the story, she declares with her mouth, "I know what it is like to be full." Not only does she know what it is like to be full, she knows what it is like to lose everything she has ever had.

Now in her day, there is something you need to understand, family was everything, and

becoming a widow in that day was not like becoming a widow today. Jesus gave special instructions to His followers on how to treat widows because they were such outcasts and were treated so poorly in society. If you had no family, you essentially had nothing. Women didn't have the same rights that we have today. In losing her husband, two sons, and being abandoned by one of her daughters-in-law, we find her left with Ruth, her only tangible sign of hope. And what we see her do is not to cling onto her, but she lets go of her.

As Naomi sends her daughter-in-law out to the fields of Boaz to be redeemed and rescued, we watch her pour herself out on behalf of another. Naomi, left with nothing, in her poverty is giving away all that she has. Even from ground zero, we watch her surrender her own wants, needs, and desires and make a sacrifice on behalf of Ruth. That is submission. In her loss and her pain, she could have been selfish and angry and bitter, but instead we find her being selfless and giving, submitting to a God who holds all things together and makes them work for the good of those who love Him, which brings us to Ruth.

A phrase that was running through my mind as I thought about Ruth's role in the story was submission in the midst of doubt and uncertainty. A foreigner who came from a pagan culture with many gods when met with a crossroads to return to what she knew, was comfortable to follow a broken, lonely widow to a foreign land and declares, "Where you go, I'll go. Where you stay, I'll stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God." A woman whom we watch consistently honor and respect both Naomi and Boaz, she asks permission to work in Boaz' fields. She listens as her mother-in-law tells her to go and offer herself to this man and propose marriage. Multiple times we watch her literally bow down before Boaz. She could have held a tight grip on her future, trying hard to make things happen, but instead she submits to the counsel of an older, Godly woman, who has her best interests in mind, trusting all along that God has good things for her as she does it. Which brings us to Boaz.

As I think about Boaz, I see quite a different picture from a broken, lonely widow and a foreign woman. Here we see a man with great power, well-respected, wealthy. He kind of has it all. He has servants, land, money, and a good reputation. He literally has everything he needs. We find him faced with an opportunity from a girl from whom he can gain nothing that he doesn't already have, surrender and risk everything he has to stick his neck out on behalf of someone else. He could have been concerned for himself, but he was actually more concerned for the well-being of others.

I recognize that I have a broad audience today but I wonder, in which situation do you find yourself? Maybe you haven't lost a husband and two sons, been abandoned by a daughter-in-law. Or maybe you have. But maybe you are struggling with infertility. Maybe you have been widowed. Maybe at an old age when you thought you were about to retire, you lost your job. The stock market crashed. You find yourself angry, and you find yourself out there in fear and you find yourself in pain. Or maybe you are younger, and God is inviting you to submit in the midst of uncertainty and doubt about what is next and what your future holds. Or maybe you are established and things are great. The kids are making straight A's. They are on the honor roll. They have great jobs. Things look good for you.

What we really see is a powerful outworking of the ways in which Jesus invites us to live. What we really see hundreds of years in advance of Paul's encouragement for us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ is Ephesians 5:21 in the flesh.

²¹ Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I think if we look hard, we can all find ourselves in the ancient texts of the Book of Ruth. And as we do this, as we find ourselves in the story, what we really see and what we really find is a powerful outworking of the ways in which Jesus invites us to live, no matter in which story we find ourselves. In messy, painful, difficult circumstances, one by one we watch Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz submit to one another, to another's counsel, out of reverence for God.

Preparing for this weekend I read a book called *The Gospel of Ruth* by Carolyn James. She talks about submission in this way. This is what she says.

“Submission is not an occasional event. It is a lifestyle. It isn't a negative obligation on women, but the natural outworking of the Gospel in every Christian's life. Submission is an attribute of Jesus, so it ought to show up in all of His followers.... Jesus' version of submission is thoughtful, strong, purposeful, and sacrificial. It is redemptive. It is the Gospel. It is a way of showing Jesus to the world.”

I have a few questions I want to propose to you, and I want to let you know that you can find them online at our Web site under the MessageGear tool that we prepare for you every Friday. This slide shows how you can register to receive the emails. (*Slide shown.*) These questions are some things we could ask ourselves whether we are in a position of pain, doubt, or power as we move forward.

- 1) Why is submission a lifestyle rather than an occasional event?
- 2) How does submission reflect Jesus' Gospel and become a powerful force in transforming lives and relationships?
- 3) In what ways is Jesus providing opportunities for me to submit today?

I hope that we never get over the powerful message of the Gospel and submission that I see in the Book of Ruth. I hope that we don't see the powerful message of the Gospel and of submission in the Book of Ruth as outdated or irrelevant. And Commitment Class, congregation, and friends, my hope is that as we navigate through life, as we take up our crosses and follow Jesus together, we would know that there is a better way than the world's way. I hope that we would know that in our pain or doubt or power, we are destined for something more and better than to build the good life for ourselves. We were created to be just like Jesus, but we can't be like Him if we leave out submission. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.