

When Small Is Great

by Stewart Ruch

We can live lives of great significance by embracing our smallness and living a life of love and sacrifice, free from the constraints of cultural expectations and personal ambitions.

Duration: 27:46

Scripture: Judges 21:25, Ruth 1:16, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 22:39, Romans 12:2, James 1:27, 1 John 4:19

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher introduces the book of Ruth as a profoundly important story for today. The sermon is part of a series called 'The Power of Small' and focuses on the significance of love and being loved. The preacher emphasizes that even though the story takes place in ancient times, it is still accessible and relevant to us today. The sermon also highlights the idea that small acts and lives can have great significance in the eyes of God.

Transcript

Every once in a while, in American culture, there will be a court case that sort of captures our whole nation. 50 states, high diversity country, and all of a sudden there's something going on within the courts that everybody's sort of paying attention to, everybody's watching, everybody's walking along with. That's not just a common phenomenon or a current phenomenon, it's actually been going on for a long time.

There was a case like this in the 1840s in America, actually it was based in our beloved Chicago here, which was then was sort of the western frontier. It was called the Reaper case. It was based off Cyrus McCormick, who had invented a certain kind of farm machinery, and it was patent law, and what to us would be rather obscure, but for cultural reasons, it captured the American attention and imagination.

It was so important, it was one of those court cases where the legal rock stars sort of lined up against each other for and against. And they were gathered from primarily the east coast, primarily educated in Ivy League schools, but they had to come all the way west to Chicago to try the case, and they knew that the judge was a Chicago judge. So they said, we need a sort of western, what we would call midwestern insider.

So they worked their networks and they found a rather obscure small town lawyer who had worked with this Chicago judge before, and they invited him to come up to Chicago to be the court case. So they all came in with their trunks and with their Ivy League degrees and their erudite abilities, and when they met

this small town lawyer that would be part of their team, they were absolutely mortified. He was ill-kept, he was poorly dressed, he had a really strong accent, and he consistently used vernacular folksy phrases that for them was very off-putting, and they thought, if we involve him at all, we will lose this case.

One of the lawyers was a man named Edwin Stanton, and Stanton said, we've got to do away, and he did this so that the small town lawyer could hear him. He said, let's do away with this ape. And then they did what any immature man would do, they ditched him.

They would have meals without him, they would tell him different times for the court case to be tried, and they would get there earlier, and the court case would be going on. They viewed him as someone of very significant insignificance. Stanton won the case, he went on to become one of the leading lights in American legal profession and politics.

As a matter of fact, he became the Secretary of War during the Civil War, and much to his shock, he went to work for the one he called Ape, who was Abraham Lincoln, whose incredible significance was not known until the very last years of his life. He was viewed as one who was small in the greater legal profession, in the greater American spectrum, until the very, very end. Small is something worth getting used to, because the fact of the matter is, just about every one of us, when it comes to celebrity culture, athletic culture, just about every one of us in that regard, we're all small.

Now, while fame may seem to be everywhere, it's right there on our mobiles, and it's always on the screen, and it seems to be kind of plastered, people's faces, people's names, people's personalities, people's bodies, everywhere. The fact of the matter is, a very, very, very, very tiny, tiny minority ever achieved any kind of fame, and the achievement of that fame is not in itself any guarantee of any real sense of significance. Most of us are small.

Look at athletics, for example. 500,000 young men play basketball in high school every year in America. Of those 500,000, half a million young men, three percent of those young men will go on to play NCAA basketball, and I'm including Division One, Division Two, and Division Three.

Three percent. A tiny fraction. When you ask of those 500,000 who go on to play in the NBA and be signed, a minuscule one percent, of which a fraction of that one percent will ever be the household name that when they're out there shooting free throws in a driveway, they think they just might be.

Small is everywhere. Now, in some ways, culturally, we tried to embrace that. We said, well, we love small.

Micro breweries. We like small breweries. We garden ourselves, so when we're there with our two brothers beer and our arugula and our salad that came from our garden, we're thinking, small is great.

But that's a different kind of small, right? It's a small for small's sake. I think it's an interesting trend and an important one, but it isn't small like we see in the book we're going to study for the next three weeks together, an awesome short story which is simply called Ruth. And Ruth is the central figure of this story.

And in Ruth, we see another kind of smallness. We see a smallness that utterly finds complete significance, but significance within the life of God. We see in where if we read the story, and as you read the story, we go through it the next three weeks, I'm hoping that your hunger for significance is actually strengthened.

You should want to be significant. You have a human desire for significance. The critical question in the book of Ruth draws us into this question is from where will your significance derive? Will it be a self-developed significance? Okay, I'm late 40s, so here's how my self-developed significance has worked.

In my early to mid-20s within my field ministry, I kind of like, you know what, probably a pretty good chance for nationally known ministry. And you know, if things work out, maybe international. I'm not going to shoot too high, but national, maybe international.

Then you get older, you think, oh, maybe regional. You get near 50, you think, oh, well, maybe just within my own little realm. And you think, I'm getting humbler.

I used to think international, now I just think, I don't know, uh, uh, Northside Wheaton. And you kind of compliment yourself. And the fact of the matter is, you're still enslaved to the exact same significance of self.

You've just moderated it by yourself, for yourself. As opposed to completely being freed from that track to the real significance that is for all of us, small people, which is the significance that comes from God. I don't know all of you by name anymore.

I used to, but I know a lot of you. And when I worked on this sermon, I thought of so many of you whose lives I know. And I wonder how often you think this life that I'm living is so insignificant.

It's small, ineffective. No one knows what I'm doing. Those who know don't like it.

I hope you'll hear this this morning, that the book of Ruth and the life of God, we can live small lives of great significance. In God's new world, small is the new significant. The book of Ruth is a celebration of this.

It's a celebration of smallness in God's greatness. It's a great short story. It's got four chapters.

It involves all kinds of things that are necessary for a story. You've got tension, you've got conflict, you have tragedy, you have comedy, you have things resolving at the end in a beautiful way. You wonder how it's going to play out.

It's a real story. Ruth really lived. There was a guy named Boaz who was a small town, pretty well-to-do farmer.

Naomi really lived. It was probably written about 3,000 years ago. And what's stunning about that is if we were to approach any other ancient document from 3,000 years ago, likely we may not find it nearly as accessible as I hope you'll find Ruth.

There's some names and areas that you may not be familiar with. Don't let those get you stopped. Keep moving.

The story itself is profoundly, profoundly important for us today. The series that we're working on is called The Power of Small. I'll do it this week and the next two weeks.

You have titles on your back, and some of you look at titles and you expect me to preach from that title. It doesn't always work that way. So as a matter of fact, I'm already trading it up.

So different series title for today, a different, excuse me, sermon title for today when small is great. Next week when crisis comes, the week after that when redemption rules. In God, those of us who are called to small lives can live lives of great significance.

Look at the significance of love and the significance of being loved. Both of those really come out of verse 16, which is the heart verse, the kind of center verse of this story. Where you go, I will go, Ruth says in Naomi.

And even more importantly, your God will be my God. The significance of love, the significance of being loved. The very first sentence in this story starts with in the days when the judges ruled.

And if you're not there in your bulletin, go ahead and go over that. We have a section of this short story there in your bulletin. And the day when judges ruled.

As a matter of fact, this is in what's called the Old Testament or the Hebrew scriptures. And this book is placed right after a book called Judges. So this is the era of what's called the Judges.

It's very important to understand this era even briefly. This was an era where there was not one key ruler over the nation or the country of Israel. There were several different kinds of rulers.

And there was a phrase used in the book of Judges that describes this era. It says everyone did what was right in their own eyes. It was a culture lacking coherence.

It was a culture lacking unified leadership. It was a culture lacking a sense of kind of common value and common morality. It was a culture that had atomized into different regional areas where lots of wacky, crazy, disturbing things were going to happen.

We have all kinds of just bizarre stories in the book of Judges. Like, for example, a very fat, plump king who's murdered and the knife gets stuck within the rolls of fat. You can't get the hand out.

It's just bizarre. I mean, if HBO could get their hands on this, what they would do with the book of Judges is just pray that HBO never reads this book. But people that are exploring Christianity say to me, hey, I want to know kind of what to read.

I have never yet said to them, you know where I would start? The book of Judges. It's just bizarre if you haven't read it. And everyone's doing what's right in their own eyes.

It's a chilling picture of a culture. That is coming apart. Now, that's the sweeping picture in the book of Judges.

As these books were compiled in the Hebrew Scriptures, they took the book of Judges and right after they put the book of Ruth. Why? There's a reason for that. Because you get the sweeping, sort of chilling view of culture and society and you go, oh my word, everything's horrible.

This is never going to work. What's going to happen? And you get the book of Ruth. And the book of Ruth, you get the word of freedom.

That being small and being insignificant actually gives you incredible freedom. That in Ruth we see a life lived beautifully. We see a life that is not constrained by the particularities of culture or where the culture is going.

But a life lived for freedom. A life lived for love. A life lived deeply loved.

There are many in our continuing dividing country who are looking at America much like many would look at the time of Judges and it's all coming apart. There's no coherence. Like where's the common value and common morality and where's the common leadership and what's going on and what are we going to do? And into our culture comes the book of Ruth.

Into our culture comes you. Into our culture comes you. Small.

But if you'll give your life to God, greatly significant. You are not constrained by the particular decisions of our culture. You are not determined by the particular decisions of the direction our culture goes.

You have incredible freedom as Ruth shows. There's the freedom that she shows, the significance of love. In the midst of the culture not only is that going on but then there's tragedy right in her own home.

She's widowed and her mother-in-law who provides the overall financial covering for the household is also widowed and her sister-in-law is widowed. Besides being a tragedy that we could immediately relate to it's a tragedy of epic economic proportions because this was how you made your economic engine work in the ancient near east. They are basically utterly exposed, utterly enmeshed in poverty and without any potential future.

What you do at this point is what Ruth's sister-in-law does which is you go back to your home, you get ensconced back there and you wait for another husband to come. You would never ever ever move or attach yourself to a mother-in-law who herself has no economic power whatsoever. In the midst of this we see Ruth acting with a kind of freedom that is actually disconcerting.

How does she even think to act this way? How does she even have her head about her to make this decision? She actually creates a loyalty and puts her widowhood second to her mother-in-law's widowhood. She puts her culture, she's Moabite, that's different than Israelite. She puts her culture second to her mother-in-law's culture.

She puts her religion, the Moabite religion, several gods in the household, statues, idols, to her mother-in-law's religion. This is what the church has called over the centuries, this is a great church word. So if you're here exploring Christianity, you're here as a committed Christian, this is a word or a phrase you need.

It's called heroic virtue. And it's a description of those who live their lives by love. Heroic virtue is not simply doing the right thing, which we might think of virtue, virtue is doing the right thing.

It's doing the thing with the power of God. It's doing the right thing with the presence of God. It's doing the right thing as God would do that thing.

In heroic virtue, we actually can live lives that are full of love. It's a life where God's presence is revealed. And this, this is what the greater world, whether they know it or not, is hoping from us.

They're hoping we'll live lives of heroic virtue, sacrificial lives, lives that are profoundly other-centered, lives that are filled with love. There's a writer, a public intellectual named David Brooks. He writes for the New York Times, regarded as one of the greatest newspapers in the country, as well as one of the more liberal newspapers in the country.

He is someone who has shown a great interest in Christianity. Some say he's almost there to a conversion. Others say he's a committed conservative Jew.

No one seems quite to know, and David Brooks hasn't made it public. But he wrote an article recently to Christians. He wrote an article to us, and he said, I am to the left of many of your positions, but I want to say something to you amidst the cultural changes that are going on.

And I paraphrase. He said, basically, be the people you once were. Be the people who go into underprivileged areas and form organizations to nurture stable families.

Be the people who build community institutions in places where they are sparse. Be the people who can help us think about how economic joblessness is connected to spiritual poverty. Be the people, David Brooks says, who converse with us about the transcendent in everyday life.

This is an outsider speaking to us, saying, be people who will embrace small lives made greatly significant by God through loving others. How do we do that? How did Ruth do it? Well, in Ruth we see that it was a specific choice in regard to a specific person with a specific sacrifice. It wasn't that Ruth sang a stirring song about love.

Those are beautiful. She didn't go see a movie about love and go, that's my number one movie. She actually specified.

She came in and she loved a specific person, Naomi, and a specific situation, poverty and tragedy with a very specific sacrifice where you go, I will go. Blind loyalty. Blind faith.

Learning to love. Learning to love as God has loved. Learning to love as Jesus has loved is a series of specific choices towards specific people with specific sacrifices.

And we always have that choice. No one can take from you the choice to love another. You always have that freedom.

This got really specific for me in parenting. One of our children, it wasn't discovered yet, but they were going through a series of horrible allergic reactions. We didn't understand it at the time.

We didn't know that it was allergy. We thought it was probably a discipline issue, but this child was about three years old and they were utterly and completely and entirely impossible. He would scream at the top of their lungs for 90 minutes.

I didn't say seconds. Just scream, just scream. They would have a kind of bizarre strength, but they literally had an adrenaline rush where they could pull themselves out of their car seat while the van was driving and they could run around the van and try to open the doors of the van.

They would sometimes have to be held by me all night long. If I didn't hold them like this all night long, they would wriggle out and scream at the top of their lungs in the middle of the night. They were absolutely completely out of control.

They were obsessive. They were compulsive. They were an impossible child.

They were turning our family life utterly upside down. Day after day after day, Catherine would call me here at the office and say, please, you've got to come home. I can't do this.

We're beside ourselves. And one of those nights, it was, well, that's where I had to hold him because he was so out of control and I fell asleep with him. And I was just utterly drained.

And I woke up and I was in the room and there was a clock with these bright red numbers, 3:23 AM. I just remember looking at that clock and just going, I can't. I just can't do this.

I can't. I can't love this kid anymore. I can't do it.

She can't do it. Catherine can't do it. Can't.

And I just knew then that I had a very specific choice. Was I going to be this kid's dad? Yes, of course. I wasn't going to pull out of that.

But was I going to half love him, detach, half commit, or was I going to fully go in to giving up my life for this kid? Now, you may say, well, Stuart, of course it was your son. You weren't going to stop being his dad. You were bonded to him.

Yes, I had a bond with him. I had a sonship bond with him that in that moment gave me the ability to say, yes, I will love in this moment. And that's exactly what we all need to love as small people with great significance.

We need a bond. We need a connection. You can't just practice heroic virtue out of hearing it and going, that's what I want to be.

Kind of hands on your hip with the wind, you know, whipping your hair and your cape flying behind you. Heroic virtue. Here I come.

I heard a sermon today about heroic virtue. You know what? So I'm just going to be heroically virtuous. It will not work without a profound bond.

You need a parent bond. You need a sonship, daughtership bond with God. The only way that Ruth, something happened to Ruth, something happened to Ruth that didn't happen to Orpah, her sister-in-law.

What happened? She had bonded with the living God. She had left the false gods of Moabite behind, and she had bonded with the God of Israel, the God who would come to be fully revealed in Jesus. And that changed her, that converted her.

You have to have the freedom to love, but to have the freedom to love, you must have the freedom of being loved, of knowing that the God of the universe utterly and completely has given his life for you and loves you and is filling you with his power and filling you with his love. And that's called conversion. And it comes again and again and again to conversion.

Either to converting for the very first time to the love of God, or if you've been converted to the love of God in Jesus Christ and you believe in him, then living that conversion, embracing that conversion, owning, as we say in our American vernacular, owning that conversion. Ruth has converted. She converted out of one religion to the following of God, the living God.

And her smallness in that conversion became significant in the story of God. This is not smallness for smallness sake. This is smallness for the sake of living in God where great significance is given.

If you are going to pursue the significance race, the significance game without God, you will never, ever be satisfied. It will never, ever come to fruition. Even if you're one of the minuscule people who achieve worldly significance, your chance and your guarantee of significance comes in conversion to Jesus Christ.

And if you're not converted, if you're here, there are many of you that are traveling with us and exploring Christianity with us. If you're hearing this and you're not converted, or you're listening to this on MP3 and you're not converted, it's a matter of giving your life to Jesus, receiving the love he has so that you are empowered to love others. And I'll say a little bit about a chance to pray with someone to receive Christ today or to strengthen your conversion in Christ.

Now we had a beautiful conversion of a woman here at Resurrection last spring. And she told us her story and I asked her permission. Her name was Claire.

And she said, you know, I was exploring Christianity, but there was always this buzz of doubt in the back of my mind. So it's kind of like when a radio station isn't quite on the right station. And it's like that kind of incessant sound doesn't have clarity.

So it was always there. And then she said, and I quote Claire, as I became aware of this feeling of this buzz of doubt, I was lying in bed one night and suddenly realized that I could no longer hear the background noise of doubt. All I heard was silence.

But the silence was so peaceful. And then all I could do was pray. I prayed for hope and strength and renewed faith.

I think it was the first real prayer I had ever prayed in my life. And then I stumbled into faith, a faith that I always imagined impossible. Jesus makes our small lives insignificant, our small lives that appear insignificant, deeply significant.

We know of Ruth and her story is written because we find out at the very end of the book that she actually was the great grandmother to a figure named David, who is the great, great, great plus grandfather of Jesus himself. Ruth is essentially Jesus's grandmother, several steps removed directly in his lineage. Her life literally pointed and led to Jesus.

And that's where her significance was utterly and completely derived in her own lifetime. She was insignificant, but now and in heaven at the end of our life and her life, she is known and known and known as one who loved and received the deep love of God. I finish with a great story that's told by a Christian thinker of the 20th century named C.S. Lewis.

He was an Englishman, Christian thinker. He wrote a story about a man who goes to heaven and the man's in heaven. He has a hose swinging around heaven and he sees this beautiful kind of parade.

At the front of the parade is this glorious, beautiful, regal woman. And he thinks, oh, is that a queen? Is that a monarch? And his host says, no, not at all. It's someone you'll never heard of.

Her name was Sarah Smith and she lived in the suburbs. Well, she seems to be a person of particular importance. The host says, oh, yes, she's one of the great ones.

You've heard that fame in your country, earth and fame in heaven are two quite different things, right? The man hadn't heard that. He says, well, who are all these young men and young women at her side? And

the host responded, they're her sons and daughters. She must have had a very large family.

No, the host says, every young man or boy that came to her back door with a package of delivery became her son. Every girl that she met was her daughter. Don't be deceived that your life is small.

Don't be deceived that you should spend it for a self-sustained significance. At the end, those whose lives are given and lived in Jesus will lead a procession of such beauty and glory. You'd think they were monarchs.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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