Text: Ruth 1
Date: August 12, 2018
Focus: God shows us steadfast love and faithful kindness, primarily in His Son Jesus Christ.
Function: As Christians, we reflect God's steadfast love and faithful kindness to our neighbors.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

This morning I would like to talk to you all about LOYALTY. And in order to get us thinking about loyalty, I would like for you all to imagine the most loyal person you know. Who is that person in your life that embodies loyalty?

Loyalty is a godly characteristic. It is one of the marks of a Christian. Loyalty is an unswerving allegiance to the people God has placed in our lives and to the calling He has given us.

Loyalty is the friend who keeps on calling even though you've missed their last 5 calls. It's the friend who sticks with you even though you flaked out on your last 3 lunch dates.

Loyalty is the dog who comes running up to you when you come home after work, even though you forgot to put out food in the morning, and didn't take her for a walk, and even though you just spent the day being a jerk to all your coworkers. I know when I asked you to picture the most loyal person in your life at least a few of you were picturing Jo Jo – and that's ok. There's a lot we can learn about loyalty from dogs.

Loyalty is the long-suffering Cubs fan who stuck with the team and continued to buy tickets and t-shirts and jerseys even through all those painful years before 2016.

Loyalty is the soldier who follows orders and marches into battle even though he doesn't understand the war or like his commander.

Loyalty is the spouse who forgives even though you've been detached and self-absorbed and disconnected from the family for months.

Loyalty is a God-pleasing characteristic.

Loyalty is actually one of the – if not the – primary characteristics of God. It actually came up in our reading for today. In verse 8 of our story Naomi prays that God would show His loyalty to Ruth. Our translation, the NIV, translated the word as "Kindness". The Hebrew word for it is "Hesed". Can you all say Hesed. Ok, repeat after me, Hesed. You need to get a little phlegm up in order to say it right, Hesed. Hesed. Again, our translation calls it "kindness" but many translations put it differently. Some call it love. Others faithfulness. And that's because there is no equivalent English word that captures the full meaning of it. And so if you look it up in a Bible dictionary, next to Hesed you might find a definition like, "Steadfast love, loyalty, and faithful kindness."

Except for the occasional exception, God's loyalty to us is very different than the loyalty we see on display in our world today. We have lots of examples of disloyalty in our world today. Like the husband who divorces his wife for a younger "newer" woman, or the faceless corporate business who fires the agin employee for a cheaper younger hire. For example, at almost every coffee-shop I go to – and I go to plenty – almost every one has some sort of loyalty program. In fact, I was just in one last week, and when I swiped my card to pay, a little message came up on the screen that said, "You earned 1 loyalty point." I've been to others that call them "loyalty stars". And those points and stars are given when you spend a certain amount.

But, you see, that's not true loyalty. At least not as God would show us. God's hesed loyalty, His steadfast love and faithful kindness loyalty is not based on points and stars. It's also not contingent or transactional. The "loyalty" programs that coffee shops and all sorts of other stores have is totally transactional. They show me loyalty only when I spend, and I show them loyalty only if they provide the products and the services I want at the prices I think are fair. If neither one of us holds up our side of the bargain, than that loyalty is broken. That's not how God works. That's not the kind of loyalty He shows us.

Our reading for today, and the entire book of Ruth is full of God's Hesed loyalty. Throughout the story God is working in the background in subtle ways to display His steadfast love and faithful kindness. It's a story in which it would be easy enough to attribute everything that happens to chance or luck, but the truth is that it's God's Hesed that is behind everything.

The story of Ruth is the story of a Moabite woman, a foreign, non-Jew named Ruth who is the daughter-in-law of a Jew named Naomi. At the beginning of the story Ruth and Naomi find themselves in dire straights. All the men in their family have died. Ruth's husband, Naomi's son, has died. Naomi's other son and husband have died as well. And together, these hopeless women are living in a foreign land, not Israel, with no one to help them.

But, God, in His hesed has brought these two faithful women together. They at least have that. Ruth has agreed to stick with Naomi and travel back to Israel with her. And they haven't been back in Israel for long when Ruth, in need of something to eat, goes out to a farmers field in order to pick at the scraps of grain that have been left behind after the harvest. But, even this is an act of God's hesed loyalty. Because it just so happens that this farmers field belongs to one of Naomi's relatives. A relative who had the responsibility of taking care of Naomi and her family. This farmer, Boaz, was the families "Redeemer" an appointed family member who was supposed to care for them should they need help. And it wasn't a chance or coincidence or luck that brought Boaz to Ruth.

As the story goes on Naomi recognizes God's work in all this and tells Ruth that she needs to ask Boaz if he'll marry her. Now, again, Boaz was Naomi's family redeemer. BUT, Ruth was a Moabite. Not a Jew. Not Naomi's blood. And Boaz, as a good Jew, had no obligation to take on this responsibility and welcome Ruth in as His wife. But, because of God's working, because of His hesed loyalty, Boaz agrees. And by the end of the story these to hopeless, helpless women are cared for and redeemed. And one day, God will work through Ruth to bring about the birth of a Savior. Ruth is the great, great, great, great, I don't know how many greats, grandmother of Jesus.

The story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz reminds us that in subtle, quiet ways, ways that could be ascribed to chance or luck, God is working out His hesed love.

And, the story of Ruth reminds us that God often works out His hesed love THROUGH His people. In our story for today Ruth beautiful exemplifies hesed love. After her husband dies she would have been totally free to stay in Moab where all her family and friends were. It would have been expected that she find a new Moab husband who would care for her and provide for her. But, instead, she gives all that security and joy away out of hesed loyalty for Naomi. Naomi also reflects a hesed love though. She sticks with her daughter in law. She prays for her daughter in law. She gives her advice and rejoices over her. Boaz, the redeeming farmer, shows hesed loyalty. He agrees to marry Ruth and provide for her and Naomi for the rest of their lives even though he has no moral or legal or religious obligation to do so.

I mentioned that there are a million ways to define hesed. Every dictionary will use different synonyms. Some will just throw everything at you. But, I heard one definition this week that I like. One theologian defined hesed as "One way love." That's the kind of loyal love God has for us. A loyal love that says, "I love you even though you don't love me back." A love that says I will pursue you even when you are running away from me." A love that says, "I'm gonna keep talking to you, even though you haven't prayed to me for months." A love that says, "I'm going to keep forgiving you, even through your broken promises to stop." A love that pays out, even though we haven't paid in. A love that keeps on knocking even when we refuse to answer.

That's hesed love and loyalty. That's the love and loyalty of the cross. Where God died for sin He never committed, for a people who didn't deserve it. Where God redeemed us – with and for no good reason – except for His hesed.

In Jesus Name, Amen.