

August 7, 2023

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Ruth 1:1-22

“Where you go, I will go”

1. Three widows stood in the rising heat of Spring across ancient Palestine in a desert between two lands, with the memory and the threat of death hanging in the air, and the Dead Sea separating the land of Moab and the land of Judah. The three husbands they had been married to had died years earlier in this land of Moab, a land which at one point had seemed like it would be the salvation for this family from Bethlehem, which literally means “House of Bread” – but a drought had made it an empty breadbasket. Their journey to Moab instead turned out to be a journey to their grave. The three widows stood in that desert feeling empty, hollow. They had walked West up to the edge of the plain in Moab, pausing before what they saw was a path descending rapidly to below sea level to the Dead Sea. Naomi had no more tears. But she still had love. Much love. As if with a final breath, she told her daughters-in-law to return home to the home of their mothers, to start a new life, because the life they had had with Naomi’s sons, now dead, had been nothing but a source of pain and bitterness. The younger widows, Ruth and Orpah would not let Naomi go. They still had tears, and their tears flowed as if trying to make their way to the salty sea below them.
2. What a stark and painful image is in this story which is beloved by our Jewish siblings, who read it every year as part of the Jewish Festival of Weeks, Shavuot. This happens at the time of the wheat harvest in Palestine. Incidentally, you get extra credit if you put it together that this was the festival which the disciples were celebrating in what we now call the day of Pentecost. Shavuot is a celebration of God’s bounty towards God’s people. This beautiful book of Ruth also helps our Jewish siblings thank God for the giving of the Law, and for the covenant with God’s people, a covenant that embraces those who draw near to God, even those from another land and people, as Ruth does in the story.
3. But how is a story which begins with a famine, migration to a foreign land, the death of three husbands, how is a story like that meant to be a celebration of a harvest?
4. Naomi was bitter. She was bitter at what she had felt God had done TO her. And to hear her daughters-in-law pleading to stay with her was like salt on a wound.
5. What? Stay with me? My sweet daughters, can you not see you force me to look at my anguish when I look at you? I wish I had more sons you could marry. But I do not! And if I gave birth to twin boys next year, what will you do? Save yourselves for years until they could marry you?! Be sensible! Survive this madness and return home! I’m returning home, but not really to survive, but to die there or at least in the journey. What’s the difference?
6. But she wasn’t saying these things because she hated them. She was trying to convince them out of love, sacrificial love. Your future is back home, with your moms. Restart there. She could have been selfish. She could have gotten them to take her back to Bethlehem. But then what? They would be three widows in need. Three vulnerable women at the mercy of those who would give them food, or take seriously the commandment in the law to care for the widows.
7. Orpah had come this far, and she relented. She started to walk back home.

8. Ruth clung to Naomi, and Naomi tried once more to convince her, out of love, to follow Orpah back home.
9. But Ruth spoke with as much love as Naomi had shown them: You can't make me love you any less than I do. You can't make me send you down to the Dead Sea alone. Where you go I'll go. Where you lay down to sleep, I'll be by your side.
10. Naomi shook her head.
11. Ruth continued: we are family, Naomi. Your son, my husband, is dead. But I am not. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. And if it happens to be that you die in this journey, well, they'll have to bury us together because as God is my witness, I will not leave you.
12. Two women expressing fearless, selfless, courageous love. In the desert. With no proof that they would make it out of this alive.
13. Naomi lets the matter drop. Or maybe stops speaking to Ruth for a while in frustration, in bitterness. Or maybe stops speaking to Ruth for a while because she is focusing her attention to the God who had turned God's back on them.
14. Naomi's name meant Pleasant One. Ha! She scoffed. Better call me Bitter One. I've got a bone to pick with the God who promised to fill us and instead has brought me back empty.
15. Our story today ended like an episode of a good TV mystery would—with a cliffhanger. With a clue of something to come. The widows, bitter and exhausted as they were, were welcomed by the women. And the narrator gives us a little line, almost a throwaway line. They had arrived at Bethlehem, the House of Bread, at the beginning of the barley harvest.
16. Tune in next Sunday to see what happens next.
17. I invite you to think about a person in your life who has loved you with such sacrificial love as was shown by Naomi in the face of tragedy, and by Ruth in the face of staggering odds against them.
18. You may be thinking of one of your parents. You may be thinking of a life-long friend. Or you may be simply thinking about how bitter it is not to have someone to step up right now when you need them most.
19. Or you may be recalling how you've taken foolish risks to love with such selflessness, to love when it didn't seem the odds would ever be in your favor.
20. We can romanticize this story (and I hope I'm not guilty of that) or we can look at it with clarity and say: these vulnerable women felt deserted and felt like no one else would be on their side. There are vulnerable people in our community today who feel at the edge of the Dead Sea, who feel invisible, who are bitter because it seems God has turned God's back on them.
21. When you hear that bitterness, whether from a person ensnared by systemic poverty or a person gutted by grief, when you hear that bitterness, let it be. Sit with them in it. Don't correct them or make light of it. Let Naomi be Mara, if that's what needs to be right then. But be Ruth to them. Cling to them. Go where they go. Stay where they stay. Let their people be your people. Let God be God. Be fearless. Be loyal.
22. We can't be Ruth just during business hours, or just during Hot Meals, or when we're not too busy or have some extra cash to give away. Not if we claim that we follow a God who is so stubbornly, unrelentingly loving towards us.

23. Be Naomi/Mara – loving to your last breath. Be Ruth – clinging loyally, and stick around in their lives to hear how their story turns out.

24. Reflection question

- a. Share an example of selfless love which has impacted your life.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-ruth/commentary-on-ruth-11-22-21-23-31-18-41-22>

Anchor Bible, Ruth, Edward F. Campbell, Jr.

A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year W, Wilda C. Gafney, p. 205ff

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shavuot>