

Message for July 23, 2023, Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church  
“Becoming Who We Are Through Relationship” Rev. Trish Eckert

Today’s Bible Wisdom teaching comes from the Book of Ruth, one of only two books named for women in the entire Bible. Across the three-year lectionary, there are only two readings from Ruth, so today I wanted to extend the text to give us a fuller sense of Naomi and Ruth’s story. This is a short book – only four chapters total – and yet it is one of the most powerful illustrations of love that we come across in scripture. As I dove into this text, I realized that we could probably do an entire month just on this book – this morning it isn’t possible to fully address the different moods of each chapter or the unexpected way such dire circumstances end up with a happy ending.

So, let’s remain mindful that woven throughout this book, there is a treasure trove of deep love and faith, grief and grace, pain and elation. The story of Naomi and Ruth unfolds during the period of the judges, about a century before David became king of Israel.

The book of Ruth begins with an Israelite family – Elimelech, Naomi (his wife) and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion – living in Moab. Originally from Bethlehem of Judah, the family left the land of its inheritance because of a famine. But tragedy soon struck. Elimelech died. Both of Naomi’s sons married Moabite women, and within 10 years, the sons died also, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law outside the kin group of her husband. Naomi had an idea of what her life would be – securely surrounded by her children and grandchildren – but her story changed. Late in life, she needs to start over and find ways to protect herself and her daughters-in law.

It might be hard for us as modern readers and hearers to comprehend the hopeless situation in which the three women found themselves. They lacked the intimacy of a family, which is a tragic situation in any time and place but they were also outside the patriarchal clan – cut off from its protection and provision. Their losses were devastating in every way. They were a non-family with no means of providing for themselves. Options for such marginalized women were few and unpleasant. Completely dependent on the generosity of others, they faced starvation or worse.

Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law to go back to their Moabite birth families, back to the protection of their fathers and brothers. Orpah feels bad about this, but she leaves.

Ruth says no, she's not going back. We hear the words that are so often read at weddings. It happens that the Hebrew translation calls on the language of marriage: when Ruth clings to Naomi, it is the same word as when a man leaves his mother and father and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. In the strongest possible language, Ruth is by Naomi's side. This is a popular reading due to the depth and beauty of the love expressed, and especially poetic in the King James Version:

*Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.*

People through the centuries have interpreted this plea and promise in many different ways.

- Maybe Ruth was raised in an abusive family and it isn't safe to return to them.
- Maybe her family was so desperately poor she doesn't want to burden them with her own hunger and needs.
- Maybe she and Naomi have developed a mother-daughter relationship.
- Or they have become close, close friends.
- Maybe Ruth and Naomi have become lovers and partners.
- Maybe Naomi's Hebrew faith appeals to Ruth. No one is certain of the religion in Moab, probably they made sacrifices to the god Chemosh; there are rumors of occasional human sacrifice. So Hebrew culture may have seemed more respectful of life and Ruth was perceptive enough to want that.
- Maybe the Hebrew father-in-law and sons were wonderful husbands who opened Ruth's eyes to better companions than she had ever known.
- All we know is that Ruth told Naomi she wasn't going back home, and Naomi assented to this. They are two women with few resources other than mutual respect, love, and desperation.

Ruth and Naomi go back to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem. Although she has been away for a long time, Naomi knows Bethlehem and the families there. She knows this is where to seek support and protection. As they travel along the road, let's consider these two women more closely.

Ruth lives in tension with her own culture. She marries outside her own people, disavows the solidarity of her family, abandons her national identity, and renounces her religious affiliation. In the entire biblical epic of Israel, only Abraham approaches this radicalness, but then he had a call from God /and also a wife. Ruth stands alone, without support - human or divine. Moreover, she reverses sexual allegiance. A young woman commits herself to an old woman in a world where life depends upon men.

Although the story takes its name from the younger woman, Ruth, it is Naomi's plight that shapes the narrative, and her plan brings it to resolution. As she encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their family's houses, she implores the *hesed* (translated as "loving kindness") of YHWH upon them: "The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Strikingly, Naomi invokes divine *hesed* based on the loyalty that Orpah and Ruth have already shown her family. She lifts up these female foreigners as models for what God ought to do and she manages to both overturn and serve patriarchy when she spells out the content of *hesed* for women who live in a man's world: to find a home, "each of you in the house of your husband."

So, let's picture, they've arrived, and along the way, Naomi explained the local customs to Ruth. Among them is that when farmers harvest grain, it is customary to drop some grain on the ground so that poor people can follow the workers to pick up that fallen grain. And keep in mind, that there are segments of today's story that we need to fill in for you here.

As they get settled in town, Naomi observes that her husband's cousin Boaz became successful while she was gone. He owns land, has farm hands, and isn't married. Naomi tells Ruth to glean in Boaz' fields - so Ruth does this. Boaz sees her and recognizes that she is his cousin's wife's foreign daughter-in-law. An undocumented field laborer, as it were - yet he tells his men, for whatever reasons we want to ascribe to him; he tells them to leave plenty of barley on the ground for the Moab gleaner.

Naomi sees how much barley Ruth is gleaning - she tells Ruth to ONLY glean in Boaz' fields. She knows something is up. And by the time we get to

chapter 3, Ruth engages in a bold act, potentially dangerous and compromising. At the insistence of Naomi, Ruth agrees without question to pursue marriage with Boaz. The plan calls for her to visit him on the threshing floor after he has celebrated the harvest and gone to sleep. There is plenty of gap-filling, here, as we come to understand that she is essentially “tricking” him into having sex with her. This is a trick to get the protection of Boaz who has money, power, and land in a place and time where women rarely have any.

The women are anxious. If this ruse doesn't work, Boaz has the power to do what he wants to an unprotected female. Anything could happen to her - no one would ask too many questions of a landowner like Boaz.

But the ploy works. Boaz wakes to discover he has spent the night with this woman – and he is not furious. He says OK, he will marry Ruth. The good news is: Ruth marries Boaz. Boaz then legally protects both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth has children with Boaz. Their first son is Obed. When Obed grows up, he has a son named Jesse. When Jesse grows up, he will have the little boy who becomes King David.

This is a remarkable story of redemption and loyalty. God is rarely mentioned yet working behind the scenes throughout. It's a story of ordinary, hard-living, and suffering people persevering in faith despite their hardships. It shows us that without compassionate friends, the world is a more ruthless place. It reminds us that the kindnesses that we show people today may ripple out for generations to come. Ruth serves as a model for all of us.

As fascinating as the story is by itself, there is more. The fact that this story finds its way into the Bible at all is wonderful. A foreigner-female hero is lifted up for her agency and praised by an ancient patriarchal culture. It took some guts and forward-thinking to put Ruth in the Bible. In my opinion, this courageousness can guide people of faith in our thinking about today's issues. Instead of denying women's agency, we should accentuate it.

The Book of Ruth portrays a new aspect of Hebrew religion. Up until this time, people understood the presence of YHWH in two ways. One was in miracles – such as Moses encountering the burning bush. The other place YHWH resided was in religious rituals conducted by priests.

Ruth is one of the first stories to suggest that the divine is present where people act with *hesed*, loving-kindness. Purity and spirituality grow out of living in loving-kindness in one's family and community. We are reminded here that we are not the first generation to live in a powerful reign of prejudice, discrimination, hatred of the immigrant, expulsion of the non-native.

The story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz encourages us. Welcoming the stranger has always been and will continue to be the spiritual home of people seeking to live meaningful lives in unholy times.

We become who we are through relationship - who we welcome becomes who we are.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

- What encounters have enabled you to know the possibilities in God?
- What suffering, sadness, repentance, and love have you known?
- How have honesty and vulnerability shaped your relationships?
- How might you build deeper connections with people who are different from you?