



JOURNEYING TOGETHER

Rev. Jefferson M. Furtado — Sunday, August 18, 2024

Ruth 1:12-18: Turn back, my daughters. Go. I am too old for a husband. If I were to say that I have hope, even if I had a husband tonight, and even more, if I were to bear sons— would you wait until they grew up? Would you refrain from having a husband? No, my daughters. This is more bitter for me than for you, since the Lord's will has come out against me."

Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth stayed with her. Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods. Turn back after your sister-in-law."

But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped speaking to her about it. (CEB)

Please, pray with me:

O God, our Help in ages past, our Hope for years to come, be Thou our Guard while life shall last, and our eternal Home! As we come into this time of preached word, open our minds, hearts, and lives to your Living Word. Transform our lives so we may live as faithful witnesses of your love for all people. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Book of Ruth paints a beautiful picture of what it means to journey with another in times of tragedy and loss. This beautifully complex story shows the other side of what it means to be a neighbor. Last week, Pastor Mary Kate preached a beautiful sermon that dove into the story of the Good Samaritan and the call to care for those who we may dislike and even hate. Today, we hear a different story about neighbor, a story that asks, what does it mean to be a good neighbor to one whom you love? What does it mean to share life with another in times of trial?

The book of Ruth tells us a story of hope in the midst of despair; it tells of possibly in the midst of scarcity; it tells of abiding faith through times of uncertainty and fear. This book tells us about enduring love, grace and providence. This is a book that speaks about real life and the challenges we face as we seek to live with others.

Despite being a fairly short book, Ruth opens with an action packed story. In the first few verses we hear a story that may sound strangely familiar to us, modern readers. A family moves away

from their homeland, leaving behind their people and all they knew, in search of a better life in a new country. This could be a story about the many migrants that arrive at our borders each day—people fleeing danger in their homelands in search of a better life in a new world. But this could also be the story of any one who has moved away from their city, state, or country, leaving all behind for a dream or a better opportunity. Many of you may know this story. The couple who packed their bags, moved across the country, and worked to fulfill their dreams. The college student who fell in love, got married, and found a home away from home. The young person, that empowered by a dream and prayer, risked it all to live into their full potential. The military family who received new orders and moved away into a new land, seeking to hold on to traditions, connections, and stories that formed their lives. This is a story that is much more common than we imagine, and takes place near and far.

Like the many individuals who continue to move away from their homes today, our biblical family—Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons—left Bethlehem, their homeland, and went to Moab, a nation with historical hostilities toward the people of Israel. In a time of famine at home, they found hope in a land despised by their people. And despite that fact, I imagine they believed this radical move was the best thing that could be done to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their loved ones. But as we see in our own lives, things don't always go according to plan. While living in this foreign land, they experienced tragedy in the death of their patriarch, and tragedy again with the death of both sons.

In a world where women had no voice or place, Naomi, who had moved away full of hopes and dreams, now finds herself widowed, childless, and as expressed by her own words, "empty."¹ All she has left is grief and despair. Naomi's two daughters-in-law find themselves in a similar situation. Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are now alone and without prospects for a good future.

What are they to do? Naomi, who had turned away from her homeland in times of scarcity, learns that God had shown mercy to the people of Israel and has provided food. So she decides to do the only thing that makes sense for her, to turn back and return home—alone. Even though we don't know why Naomi decided to dismiss her daughters-in-law, it makes sense.

¹ Ruth 1:21, NRSV: "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty."

Perhaps she understood that two Moabite women would never be accepted in the land of Israel. The Torah clearly stated that no Moabite would ever be accepted into the “assembly of the Lord.”² So, if they were to never become a part of the people of Israel, they would be a greater burden. Or, perhaps Naomi wanted her daughters-in-law to have something she believed she could no longer attain, a husband, children, and future. So, she sends them back to their mother’s house. She acknowledges their kindness, prays for their welfare, and blesses them saying, “The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.”³ Naomi kisses them and sends them home. But they refuse to leave. These three women have gone through a lot of life together. So, Ruth and Orpah, cling to their mother-in-law and say they will not leave. But Naomi persuades them to go. She tells them there is nothing more she can do for them, there is nothing more she can offer.

I imagine that Naomi feels that she is truly alone. She believes God has turned away from her. Life for her is now bitter and sad. She tells Orpah and Ruth that even if by some miracle she could find a husband in her old age, the two of them would waste their lives waiting for another child to come from her womb. Naomi finds herself in a state of total abandonment and despair. She embraces solitude as her best possible companion. But Solitude, Henri Nouwen says, can lead us “to the realization that we are not driven together but brought together.”⁴ Nouwen continues, “In solitude we come to know our fellow human beings not as partners who can satisfy our deepest needs, but as brothers and sisters with whom we are called to give visibility to God’s all-embracing love. In solitude we discover that community is not a common ideology, but a response to a common call.”⁵ **Sometimes only when we find ourselves in a state of solitude, when we find ourselves away from those who love and care for us, when we find ourselves alone with our thoughts, we realize the importance of community.** We realize the truth in Henri Nouwen’s words, we have been brought together by a power greater than ourselves and we are connected to one another. We realize that we cannot do life alone.

² Deuteronomy 23:3-6.

³ Ruth 1:9, NRSV.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, “Solitude” in *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* (p. 234).

⁵ Ibid.

It was while Naomi found herself in this state of solitude and despair that Ruth pledged her loyalty to her mother-in-law and chose to be a neighbor. Ruth's words proclaim a solemn vow of love and dedication. She says, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried." Even after being released from her familial commitment, Ruth made a choice to remain loyal and journey with her mother-in-law into an unknown future and into a hostile land. She gives up her culture, her family bonds, and all she had ever known, clinging to Naomi, not knowing what the future would bring.

There was no law or custom that obligated Ruth to continue to care for her mother-in-law after the death of her husband. Therefore, in going home, Orpah did the right thing. She went back to her family, assured that by her customs she had done what was right. So, Orpah was obedient to the wishes of her mother-in-law and went back to her own people. We don't know why Ruth chose a different path, but I believe she felt called to be present with Naomi in her time of need. Can you imagine, going into a country where for generations people have hated you and your kinfolk? This is something that can only be accomplished with faith and love. Ruth chose to take the first step and go on a journey together with somebody who was not sure where they were going.

How do we choose to be a neighbor to others experiencing difficulties in their lives? How might we be blessed when we choose to walk through unfamiliar paths with others? Those are questions that really do not have a right answer, but we must be willing to engage in the process. We must be willing to say yes to the journey, and invite ourselves to be in relationship with others who find themselves in places where solitude might be their only companion. There is something about our willingness and ability to love that enables us to share life with others, especially in times of difficulty. The great poet James Baldwin, said love "takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within." When we choose to love we discover our true selves. As I said a few weeks back, by love I don't mean infatuation or desire. By love I mean the great power that pulls together and loudly proclaims that there is something that holds us close to one another, something that enables us to overcome our

differences and be united. When we truly love the other we see them in their fullness. We not only see the things we like about them, but also their quirks and faults, and though we see all of that we still choose to be together. Please do not confuse this with the false narratives that accept abusive situations. Whether in romantic or personal relationships violence and abuse have no place. Those who claim otherwise betray the words of Jesus who commanded us to love others as he has loved us.⁶

Our life of faith calls us to be neighbors to others. It calls us to be present with them in times of difficulty. Often times when we talk about being a community of faith we place inordinate focus on things like theology, doctrine, and right religion. But as important as those things are, Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains, “they are disembodied entities. They are heard, learned, and apprehended, and that is all.”⁷ But, we are called to live incarnational lives. We, the body of Christ—those whom Jesus sent into the world—were tasked with being the visible reality of God’s love. Ruth being a foreigner and outsider, chose that path. She decided to ignore the norms of society and journey with Naomi, as Christ journeys with us. I feel that Ruth somehow understood that Naomi, had to take a journey of her own. Naomi had to move from the place where she saw herself alone to a new place, where she was able to celebrate life. Like all our journeys, Naomi's journey is a journey of grace; it is a journey that takes time; and it’s a journey that is not easy. But by the grace of God she accomplished it and Ruth was there to support her.

How can you be a neighbor to others experiencing difficulties in their lives? We can all begin by choosing to be present, to share the love of God with them, and be open to the move of the Holy Spirit who is able to guide, heal, and sustain each of us.

This week, how can you offer support to somebody who is going through a difficult time? It may feel strange, awkward, and out of your comfort zone, but when we found ourselves out of dept, we often become more open to the power and work of the Holy Spirit. Can you send a card, letter, make a phone call, or simply be present?

⁶ John 13:34

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “*A Visible Reality*” in *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* (p. 42). Plough Publishing House. Kindle Edition.

May we go forth in faith, trusting in the one who shows mercy to all people, from one generation to the next.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.