

Ruth 1:11-18
Psalm 100
Colossians 4:7-11

14th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 11, 2022

Faithful Companions

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In the story of Ruth we know that Naomi and her small family are traveling from Jerusalem to Moab to escape famine. The men die and Naomi is left without her family in a foreign land. So she decides to return home. Her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth, insists that she will go with her. Listen to these words from Ruth 1:11-18...

Introduction to the Psalm

Our psalm is a simple hymn of praise, sung by a procession of worshippers as they enter the gates and pass into the courts of the temple. The fifth and final verse declares God's faithfulness to all generations. Listen to these words from Psalm 100...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In the last chapter of his letter to the Christians at Colossae, Paul, who is in prison, perhaps in Ephesus, gives final greetings and refers to some of his faithful companions, men who have stood by him in his missionary work. Listen to these words from Colossians 4:7-11...

Sermon

So far in our summer series of sermons on the nine fruits of the Spirit, as listed by Paul in Galatians 5, we have looked at Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, and Goodness. Today we look at the seventh: Faithfulness.

Following the death of his wife Joy from cancer at the age of 45, C. S. Lewis wrote a little book called *A Grief Observed*. Lewis had come to appreciate that grief is an integral part of love. He wrote:

I had been warned—I had warned myself—not to reckon on worldly happiness. We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the programme. We were even told ‘Blessed are they that mourn’ and I accepted it. I’ve got nothing that I hadn’t bargained for. Of course it is different when the thing happens to oneself, not to others, and in reality, not in imagination. (p. 31)

Naomi knew about grief. Due to the famine in Bethlehem of Judah, she had moved with her husband Elimelech and their two sons, Mahlon (may’ lon) and Chilion (kil’ ee-uhn), to the country of Moab—a place that many Israelites viewed with distain. For the Moabites were a people formed from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. (Genesis 19:30-38)

While in Moab, Naomi’s husband died, leaving her with her two sons. They marry Moabite women—one named Orpah (or’puh) and the other Ruth. But after about ten years, both sons also died. So there Naomi was, in a foreign land, having lost her husband and her two sons. When she begins her journey back to her home in the land of Judah, her two daughters-in-law are intent on going with her. But she tells them, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house.” (v. 1:8a) And then she blesses them with these words:

May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” (vv. 8b-9a)

Naomi kissed them and they wept aloud. Then again Orpah and Ruth declare their desire to go with Naomi to her home in Bethlehem. But Naomi insists a third time that they go back to Moab. Finally, Orpah relents, but Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, uttering those famous words:

“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

Ruth's response is well-known because of its popularity in many Christian weddings. But few realize that these are the words of one widow to another, a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. Also missing is the sense that one of the parties is resisting the desire of the other—"Do not urge me to leave," says Ruth to Naomi. But by the grace of God, different ages and the backgrounds of people traditionally hostile to one another will not sever their bond. When Naomi understood how determined Ruth was to go with her, she finally accepted her allegiance. And together they go on to Bethlehem. And because of her faithfulness, Ruth became a great-grandmother of King David, and a direct ancestor of our Lord Jesus.

What we see in Ruth's pledge of loyalty is expressive of a key theological concept in the Bible known by the Hebrew term *hesed*, often translated as "faithful" or "loyal." *Hesed* is not merely an emotion, but involves actions on behalf of someone in need. It describes a sense of love and loyalty that leads to merciful behavior toward another person.

Professor at Hebrew Union College, Rachel Adler, has noted that *hesed* and blessings are gifts that even the destitute can bestow. "The theology of Ruth illustrates the power of blessings and *hesed* to transform futility into fertility and despair into hope." (*Introduction in The JPS Bible Commentary to Ruth*, p. 1) When you think of it, Naomi's encouraging her daughters-in-law to go back to their home in Moab was an act of love. A letting go—for their well-being.

Now that same faithfulness and kindness seen in the Book of Ruth is what you show as you reach out to members and friends of the congregation and beyond who hurt, who grieve, who despair. In fulfillment of Jesus' great commandments, you show your love of God and of your neighbor through expressions of kindness and caring—through supporting a variety of outreach programs—through visits, cards, calls, meals, and prayers for friends and members of the church. Know that even as God was working through ordinary people in the Book of Ruth,

he is also working through you and your common acts of love, helping to turn the bitterness of loss into acceptance and hope.

The relationship of Ruth and Naomi seen in chapter 1 foreshadows the peaceable community that we see in the remaining chapters of Ruth. It's a community that welcomes the stranger. A community where the poor and hungry are cared for. A community inclusive of age and gender. (Katherine Sakenfield, *Ruth in Interpretation*, pp. 9-11) The community that is found in Ruth is a community that practices hospitality. How gratifying it was to hear of the hospitality you practice in welcoming visitors and strangers.

Many of us have seen the 1971 movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, a musical set in Czarist Russia in 1905. In one of the memorable early scenes of the movie, we have the Jewish family service on the eve of the Sabbath. The song being sung is called "Sabbath Prayer." But instead of the traditional prayer for girls—"May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah"—in the movie the blessing offered for the girls is: "May you be like Ruth and like Esther."

Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah have been called the matriarchs of the Jewish faith. They played strong supporting roles in the success of their husbands: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. While Ruth and Esther are not thought of as matriarchs, they nonetheless are the only two women to have books in the Bible named after them.

So, perhaps the movie subtly says to daughters (and sons) today: "Be like Ruth and Esther—strong and accepting of your life and its challenges; be like Ruth and Esther—who provide a model and a guide for the future." Thereby, the blessing that is theirs will be yours, to be shared with others, today.

Now the Greek word that Paul uses for faithfulness in his letter to the Colossians is *pistis*, indicating the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit that pertains to loyalty and trustworthiness.

It is often coupled with another Christian virtue like love, as in 1 Thessalonians 3:6a, “Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love.”

As Ruth provides an example of “faithfulness” in the Old Testament, so too do we find such examples in the New Testament. Take our Epistle Lesson today in Colossians 4. But first, the context. Paul was in prison awaiting trial. And William Barclay notes that it wasn’t safe to be a prisoner’s friend. It took courage to declare yourself a friend of Paul, to visit him in prison.

So let us look at Tychicus (tich’ uh kus), whom Paul says is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant. Tychicus came from the Roman province of Asia. He was one of Paul’s personal representatives and apparently the bearer of Paul’s letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians and possibly of 2 Timothy. He may well have been the one to carry the offering of the church to the poor Christians in Jerusalem that we read about in Acts 20. In our lesson Paul writes that Tychicus will tell the Colossians all that’s going on with Paul. So this envoy of the great missionary was the trusted and faithful Tychicus.

Then there is Onesimus, whom Paul says is a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of yourselves. Onesimus was the runaway slave of Philemon. Paul had converted Onesimus to Christianity and was his spiritual father. When Paul sends him back to Philemon, he urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as “a faithful and beloved brother.” That is, to receive him as a member of the church, and no longer as a slave.

Paul continues the list of faithful companions with Aristarchus, his fellow prisoner who accompanied Paul on the third missionary journey. Then Mark, and then a man named Jesus, who was called Justus. All of these form a part of that great cloud of witnesses that we read about in Hebrews 12. They surround us and call us to remove anything that hinders the running of the race marked out for us. And they call us to look ...

...to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:2)

The same God of whom the psalmist declared is good, whose love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

My friends, you and I can bear the fruit of faithfulness in our lives and in our church here at Midway. We can echo the voice of Ruth in helping others deal with dark valleys, transforming despair into hope, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ. (Gal. 6:2) We can be like those faithful companions of the Apostle Paul, by looking unto Jesus, the truly faithful One. The Son who was loyal to the Father, humbling himself by becoming obedient unto death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:8)

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