

Ruth 1:1-22
Mark 12:28-34

19th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
October 8, 2023

Sneezing at the Post Office

Introduction to Scriptures

Our Old Testament lesson this morning is taken from the book of Ruth. There we find the story of an Israelite family welcoming a Moabite daughter-in-law, who proves to be a model of faithfulness. And in the end Ruth becomes an ancestor of King David, who becomes an ancestor of Jesus Christ. Listen to these words from Chapter 1, verses 1-22 . . .

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our New Testament lesson is from The Gospel According to Mark. In a section filled with controversies and teachings in and around the temple, we find Jesus' words about the two most important commandments. They come in answer to a question by a religious leader. Listen to these words from Mark 12:28-34 . . .

Sermon

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 (mah' 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 Elimelech 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.

Many of us here today know what it is to lose a loved one. I have had the privilege and honor to be with some of you as you walked through the valley of the shadow of death, cast by the loss of one near and dear. And we as a congregation have lost beloved members.

Not only has there been loss due to death. Some have lost their health, some their jobs. We've lost the joy of having young people in the congregation. And many of us feel the traditions and morals we grew up with have fallen by the wayside. Stores are open on Sundays. Prime-time television programs are often offensive. Many policies seem dictated by political correctness. Sometimes we feel we're strangers in a strange new land.

When Naomi 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 back 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 accepts her allegiance. And together they go on to Bethlehem.

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*, usually translated as “kindness” or loyalty.” It refers to acts of benevolence that one does out of kindness.

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) We see *hesed* not only in Ruth, but in Naomi and the women of Bethlehem, as well as Boaz and the men of Bethlehem. 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.

In her book, *An Altar to the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “Where I live, you can sneeze in the line at the post office and receive half a dozen blessings from people you do not even know.” (pp. 193-194) Most of us can relate to that observation. And it’s not unusual where we live to hear someone say, “Have a blessed day.”

Now that same faithfulness and kindness seen in the Book of Ruth is what we show as we reach out to members and friends of the congregation who hurt, who grieve, who despair. In fulfillment of Jesus' great commandments, we show our love of God and of our neighbor through expressions of kindness and caring—visits, cards, calls, meals, and through our prayers. Know that even as God was working through ordinary people in the Book of Ruth, he is also working through us and our 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 all ages, men and women. (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 a new member say that Midway is "the definition of hospitality."

There was a young college student named Bill who had wild hair, spiked with vivid colors, and he wore a nose ring. Bill always wore a T-shirt with holes in it, blue jeans, and no shoes. He was a brilliant young man who became a Christian while attending college. There he became involved in a Christian organization on campus, but he also wanted to find a church. Across the street from Bill's college sat a traditional church.

Well one Sunday Bill decided to visit that church. He walked into the sanctuary with his nose ring, no shoes, jeans and a T-shirt, and wild hair. The service had already started, so Bill walked down the aisle looking for a seat. But the church was packed, and he could not find a seat anywhere. By now people were uncomfortable, but no one said anything as Bill got closer to the front of the church. When he realized there were no seats left, he squatted down and sat in the aisle. Although this was perfectly acceptable behavior at his college fellowship group, this had

never happened before in this church! The tension in the congregation was palpable. The preacher didn't know what to do and just stood there in silence.

About that time an elderly man, one of the old patriarchs of the church, slowly made his way down the aisle toward Bill. The man, in his eighties, had silver-gray hair and always wore a three-piece suit. He was a godly man—elegant, dignified, traditional, and conservative. As he started walking toward the student, everyone was thinking: “You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid with a nose ring, wild hair, T-shirt and jeans, and no shoes, sitting on the church floor?” They knew he would banish this visitor from the church.

Now the old man walked with a cane, so it took a long time for him to reach the boy. The church was utterly silent except for the clicking of the old man's cane. All eyes focused on him. When he finally reached the young student, he paused a moment, and dropped his cane on the floor. Then, with great difficulty, the old man lowered himself and sat down next to the student. He shook his hand, and said, “Welcome to our church,” and sat with him for the rest of the service. “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” (Mt. 25:35)

Many of us have seen the 1971 movie, *Fiddler on the Roof*, a musical set in Czarist Russia in 1905. Anti-Semitism was present then, as it is now in many parts of the world—including the United States. Tevye (tev e uh) tries to be true to the **traditions** of his faith. But the world is changing. The three older of his five daughters, Tzeitel, Hodel, and Chava, each wants to marry the man she loves. But Tzeitel's love is a poor tailor; Hodel's love is a radical stranger; and Chava's love is a non-Jew. Tevye struggles greatly, but in the end gives his blessing.

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. And it is the Jewish custom to read Ruth on Shavout (sha voo ot) the festival that commemorates the gift of the Torah at Sinai. Esther is read at Purim, the festival that celebrates the saving of the Jewish people from Haman.

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.

And that same Sabbath prayer can be said for a congregation dealing with a number of losses. A congregation that feels that without our traditions, our lives would be “as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.” Be like Ruth and Esther—strong and accepting of your life and its challenges. Be like Ruth and Esther and the others who create a peaceable community. Be the church of Jesus Christ—for the long-time members and for the first-time visitor. Continue to welcome the stranger, “for by so doing some have entertained angels unaware.” (Hebrew 13:2b)

My friends, let join hands and walk together—knowing that God is with us and for us. Let us continue to manifest a loving community where people are cared for. Let us exhibit the kindness and faithfulness of Ruth—that transforms despair into hope. You don’t have to be a minister to pronounce a blessing. Each of you can pronounce a blessing on someone this week—even someone who sneezes at the post office.

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