

What She Did for Love

Texts: Ruth 1:11-19a; John 15:9-17

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on November 8, 2020

Although you're hearing this on Sunday, I'm recording this on Tuesday afternoon, when the only election results announced are from the five people who voted at midnight in Dixville Notch, New Hampshire. So I didn't pick these Bible readings because I knew how the election turned out or what happened in the aftermath. In fact, having to produce a sermon in advance of something as tense and divisive as this election knowing that it won't be seen until five days after is one of the biggest challenges I've faced in ministry. I've wrestled with it for well over a month. What could I possibly preach about that could speak to any outcome and provide hope and grounding, even as I watch businesses board up in anticipation of violence?

At the Blessing of the Saints last week, I shared the one thing I know: Love is all that matters. Period. Love is the only answer to any question and the only solution to any and every problem. Not love as warm fuzzy feelings, but love as manifest in acts of compassion, of justice, of courage, of humility. If love is the answer no matter what, then love is the only safe things to preach about when you literally don't know what tomorrow will bring. Remembering that, led me to Ruth, which is a story of a love that transcends political, ethnic, and religious boundaries; a love that gave Israel a king who was able to solidify its disparate tribes into one nation and then a Messiah who would give up life itself for the salvation of the world. So, forget about whatever is going on out there for a few minutes and enter into Ruth's story. And maybe we can find a light here to guide us through.

To begin with, if you've never read the book of Ruth, kick back for half an hour this afternoon and read it. It's short, heartwarming, and one of the jewels of the Hebrew Scriptures. The section of Ruth you just heard comes from the beginning of the story where we find three women in the ancient country of Moab, which today sits in the Kingdom of Jordan, just across the Dead Sea from Israel. All three women are in crisis.

Naomi, the mother-in-law of the other two, isn't a Moabite. She's an Israelite from Bethlehem. But when Israel had a famine, Naomi, her husband, and their two sons moved to Moab, basically as refugees. The famine was not short-lived, and the family settled down in the new country and the two sons each married a Moabite woman. One married Ruth and the other married Orpah. At the time of this story, all the men have died, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah all as widows.

In that society, as in some places today, a woman without a husband or sons had no means of support, and so Naomi decided to return to her homeland, the second move of desperation she's had to make. The famine was over and she knew she had a better shot at surviving among her own people, where the law required care for widows and where other kin, however far removed, would have a duty to help her. But she also knew that such help didn't extend to Moabites, which could mean considerable hardship for Ruth and Orpah if they came along. While she clearly loved them both, Naomi urged them both to stay in Moab, where they would have a better shot at avoiding abject poverty. Both daughters refused, which is where our reading picks up.

Naomi continues to insist, and Orpah is tearfully persuaded to return to her own family. But Ruth will not leave her mother-in-law and vows to follow her back to Bethlehem, to adopt her way of life, and to accept her fate. This is no small decision. Ruth is leaving her own family of origin...those who would be bound to take care of her until she can marry again. She is leaving her homeland to live in a foreign country...and it's a hostile foreign country at that.

If you read through your Old Testament, you'll see that there are strict rules for the people of Israel about not associating with the Moabites. There was both ethnic and religious rivalry. Certainly nobody in Israel is supposed to marry a Moabite, and getting married is Ruth's only ticket out of poverty. Naomi's advice that Ruth should return home, as Orpah did, is sound and sensible. Ruth can expect nothing but hardship in Naomi's homeland.

Ruth counters Naomi's argument with the lovely words that have been read at countless weddings: "Wherever you go, I shall go; and wherever you lodge, I shall lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I shall die—there I shall be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you." After that declaration they step out together...Naomi finally going home, and Ruth leaving home, family, and nation for the love of her mother-in-law.

You really should just read the story, but Ruth's act of love and faithfulness is greatly rewarded. With some smart strategy and quick thinking on Naomi's part, Ruth does find a husband in Bethlehem. Through their children, she becomes an ancestor of Israel's King David, which is one of the reasons the story is in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christians extend that genealogy from King David to the one called the Son of David, and Ruth becomes one of just a handful of women mentioned as part of Jesus' genealogy in the New Testament. This Moabite woman that no Israelite was supposed to marry becomes one of the ancestors of David and then Jesus.

Ruth's story also becomes a key narrative read at the Jewish festival of Shavuot or, as it is known in Greek, Pentecost. Shavuot, or Pentecost, celebrates both the harvest and the covenant between God and Israel established with the giving of the commandments at Mt. Sinai. Christians see the giving of the Ten Commandments as the establishment of a legal code. Jews describe that same event using the metaphor of a wedding—a covenant of love and faithfulness between God and God's people that echoes the promise of Ruth to her mother-in-law to go where she goes and to lodge where she lodges, to death and beyond.

The shape that Ruth's love took is exactly what we need right now, no matter what states turn what colors when the votes are counted. We need the covenant between human beings that doesn't let religion, race, and nationality stand in the way of helping each other when times are hard, and of working to be sure everyone has the security of home and family in all possible configurations.

Ruth's love for Naomi gave her the courage to leave her home, not only for an uncertain future, but for one whose odds were stacked against her. We need that, too. We need the courage to leave home, not just literally as a soldier does in war, or as a healthcare worker does to help Covid patients, but also to leave our metaphorical homes—the comfortable places we retreat to when faced with things we'd rather not see or understand.

We need to face up to the fact that the divisions in our current hellscape weren't created by our adversaries. The divisions themselves were already here, created over centuries by those of us with the power and privilege to retreat to our homes when things got uncomfortable instead of finding the courage to get out there and truly solve the inequities, injustices, and broken systems that threaten to become our undoing. Our enemies merely grabbed us by the fault lines we had already created and started shaking, enjoying the show as we devour each other.

I know it's hard. But we are the ones who profess to follow a guy who carried his own cross up to a brutal execution despite his total innocence and then asked God to forgive those who did it as he died. We sing about it with great emotion, we wear that brutal instrument of death around our necks. We sign up to be disciples of that guy—to do what Jesus did in the way that he did it and then seem shocked—shocked! when we're asked to leave our comfort zone? We sing, "I love to tell the story," but come on—do we even KNOW the story? At what point does Jesus go home, kick back, and have a beer and ignore blind beggars lining the streets of the city? When he prays, he sweats blood.

So put aside for a minute WHAT you are currently doing in your life, either in response to the election or to anything else. The root question in the Bible is WHY are you doing it? The biblical ideal is to do all that we do for the sake of love—love of God that is expressed through loving our neighbors as ourselves. Things we do for other reasons are at best a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. At worst—well, both the Bible and all of human history is full of examples of what the failure to love can bring.

And it is not just our love for other individuals, although that's a key part of it. God so loved the WORLD, we are told in John 3:16. Abraham was sent to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, and that calling of God's people has never changed. As people who have taken the name of Christ...the name of Christian...we are called to be a blessing the world. It is to our shame that many parts of the world don't feel blessed by our actions.

Love should drive us as Christians to be in the forefront of the fight against poverty. We give of our resources as a mirror of God's love and self-giving for the world. That same love should push us to be out front standing against racism and all forms of hatred and bigotry. If God is love and Jesus is God...as the Christian faith proclaims...then hate is anti-Christ. When we protect the weak and vulnerable, when we welcome the outcast, when we give up our own sense of entitlement to comfort, ease, and security and go straight into the difficult places, we are taking up our cross and following Christ...not out of fear of hell, not out of sullen duty, and not for extra stars in our crown. We leave our comfortable home as an expression of God's love for the world. A covenant like that between the Israelites and God at Mt. Sinai and between Ruth and her mother-in-law when it wasn't clear how either of them would support themselves.

Like Naomi, the world may have lots of reasons...lots of very good reasons, for telling us to stay at home. It's comfortable. It makes sense for our own security and well-being. But that's why the book wasn't named after the practical Naomi, no matter how kind and loveable she was. It was named after Ruth...the one who left her native land, her religion, and all reasonable hope of a secure future for the sake of love. And God rewarded her with a part in the salvation of the world.

As you listen to this on Sunday, you will know things that I don't as I stand here on Tuesday. But whatever happens during the intervening days, and whatever comes after that, the thing that will heal our divisions, and get us through is no different than its ever been. It will take a covenant of faithfulness, compassion, and courage; all of which are manifestations of love. Love one another. It's all that matters. It will heal us. It will save us. Amen.