

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, October 15, 2023

So this weekend is our churchwide retreat. Y'all are here because you didn't head East to NaCoMe and that is just fine. We are glad that you made it here and made it here at 10:00. We might have some visitors come and join us about 10:45, and when they do we should just smile and welcome them and invite them to cookies after. We had over a hundred folks at NaCoMe, and they are probably getting on the road right about now to make their way back here. Many of them worshiped the Lord this morning, just like we are, in the beauty of that place. The energy and the fun that was had is..is a gift. So, let's pray for their traveling mercies as they make their way back here to Memphis, and this morning, as Jeanene alluded to, we will read together a story about plans changing. This story comes to us from the Book of Ruth, the first chapter. It's a long text. We're reading from verse 1 through verse 17, and in seminary a New Testament professor of mine told us when there were big words in scripture, we should say them loudly and quickly, and everyone would believe that we'd pronounced them correctly. So I'm going to do that for a number of the words here at the beginning of our text. We'll learn together what it is that this story of Ruth and Naomi and Orpah has to teach us about not only our faithfulness in the world today, but also the faithfulness of God. Before we read that text together, let us go to God In prayer.

Gracious Spirit, fall fresh upon us in these moments. Fall fresh upon us and quiet us that we might hear your word for us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the first verse of the first chapter of the Book of Ruth:

Ruth 1:1-17

1 In the days when the judges ruled,1 there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. 2 The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. 3 Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. 8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9 May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud 10 and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." 11 But Naomi said, "Return home, my

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daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12 Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me!" 14 At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." 16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Just down there a week from now we'll have a...a wedding. It'll be a wonderful celebration, and one of the texts that we will read will be a portion of this text from Ruth. Specifically, we'll read verses 16 and 17. We will talk about the way in which these verses communicate a different type of love that is shared in the world, and it will be good, and it will be beautiful; but if we were to only focus on 16 and 17, we would miss, I think, much of the depth and the breadth of what it is God is trying to teach God's people through this text. Notice, actually, if you were to read the entirety of the Book of Ruth, the narrator will never mention God. The characters in the story, they will refer to God and mention God, but the narrator won't. God's presence in this text is understood. That is because it was crafted with a particular purpose. This story was crafted to have influence over the Israelites, for the original hearers there would have been those returning from exile back into a land that they had known. But as they return back, what they're going to find is that there has been a...a good bit of...of mixing of people. Particularly intermarriage has happened amongst people from different regions and even different belief systems; and so some would tell us...some scholars would tell us that this story that we know as the Book of Ruth, it was crafted to help the the Israelites make sense of a more diverse world that they are returning to; and what they hear is a story of a Moabite woman, actually two, who cling tightly and well to an Israelite woman.

This isn't the way that Naomi would have drawn up her life, or probably if she had the choice, it wouldn't have been the people that her sons choose to marry, but it's not how life goes. And so instead, Naomi is a part of a mixed family now—diverse history and different things that everybody brings to the table. And what we get as an example of love in this text comes to us in verse 16 when Ruth refuses to leave the side of Naomi. So this story becomes for us a story of loyalty in love. We'll get to that loyalty piece a little bit later, but I think we...we should really focus a bit on the unlikeliness of this connection between Ruth and Naomi, really Orpah, Ruth, and Naomi. Karen Strand Winslow is a professor emeritus from Azusa Pacific Seminary. She puts it this way. "We may not realize how much of an outsider Ruth was to the early audiences of this drama. Israel's story of Moab's origins disparages them. In Genesis 19 we learn that the nations of Moab and Aman descended from the sons of Lot and his daughters, who feared they

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could never have children any other way after surviving the destruction of Sodom. And so throughout much of their history Moab was seen as Israel's enemy. The legal ruling against these nations—Moab and Aman—excludes any Ammonite or Moabite from being admitted to the assembly of the Lord even to the 10th generation.”

That's in Deuteronomy 23. And so Ruth and Orpah—they aren't just people with different histories; they are really enemies of Naomi's people, and yet by God's divine provision, they become family. And then in and through this story, we are open to this idea that people who are supposed to be enemies can actually fall deeply in love with each other, not romantic love in the way that we might imagine it a week from now, but more in the familial type of love that we have to choose day in and day out. And what's interesting to me about this story, amongst many things, is that this story of love, the way in which Ruth lives it out, illustrates love. It doesn't just...it doesn't just communicate human love. What it also does is it parallels divine love. Here's what I mean.

Naomi has nothing to offer Ruth. She says, “What? Am I going to have more sons for you? Even if I found a husband tonight, and we conceived and we bore sons, would you wait until they were fully grown and then marry them and then hope that maybe you can still have children then?” Naomi has nothing to offer Ruth. Widows in this time were in a perilous position—unsafe was their life.

And in that way Ruth's choice to love Naomi parallels divine love. We have nothing to offer God, but God chooses to love us. Nothing that we can bring before God that would justify us, and yet God extends God's love to us. And what it seems to communicate in this story then is that the coming of the kingdom of God rests on our willingness to love people who offer us nothing in return. And if love then is not rooted in the transactional nature of it, then what is it rooted in? It is rooted in our humanity. Love that grows not from one's worthiness or what one can provide, but love that grows from one simply being created in God's image. Simply being human. Ruth does not love Naomi because of her ideology, her religious identity. Ruth loves Naomi because she is born of the divine. In a world that would have these two women see each other as enemies, they become kin. They choose to bear with one another. They choose to love each other, to see each other's humanity, and to give thanks for it.

When I was growing up, my dad would turn on the radio, and we'd listen to Paul Harvey, and we'd hear the “rest of the story.” Maybe some of y'all are familiar with that radio show. And this story would be told, and then Paul would come back in and say, “Now, the rest of the story.” The rest of the story for Ruth and Naomi is that there's this new character that's going to come about in a couple chapters. There's only four in the Book of Ruth. I encourage you— go home this afternoon. It's gray. You're not going to be outside. Open up the Book of Ruth and read through it, and what you're going to see is that in the rest of the story is that Ruth and Naomi— they come to know this man named Boaz, and ultimately Ruth and...and Boaz are going to get together. They will be married. They will bear a child—Obid, and Obid will be the grandfather of King David. And that becomes incredibly important not only to the...the people of Israel but

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ultimately to each of us—heirs of the lineage of David through Christ. The rest of the story is that God will provide in ways that Ruth and Naomi could scarcely imagine could happen. The rest of the story is that a love between two people that the world would say should not persist. By bearing together Ruth and Naomi give birth to this beautiful lineage that will ultimately save the world. But before that we have this particular interaction in the text today. This challenge, this story that challenges us to love and to value one's humanity over and above any other identity—religious, ideological, or even national. This love of Ruth that challenges us to claim the sacredness, the holiness of all humanity. Loving in this way, we find out, returns us to ourselves in the fullness of our own humanity. Unconditional love is actually the only way that we can come back to ourselves fully. If we wait for the conditions to be perfect, if we wait for worthiness to be the driver of our love, we will never fully come back to ourselves. To be rooted in love is to be rooted in the fullness of our humanity, and that becomes particularly important for us to know this week as we witness the devastation that is happening in Israel and Gaza, as we witness together the brokenness that comes from violence.

Your ears and your eyes as you've taken in all the different story telling this week, I'm sure, have been overwhelmed with different perspectives, different claims on full truth. It's been difficult for me, and, I imagine, for you to sift through and to know how it is we are supposed to feel. Often, when I don't know how to feel, I go seeking after people that I find to be wise ones, who seem to have perspective when I don't. Valerie Kaur is one of those people for me. She has been for a while. Several years ago, just after the 2016 election, she gave a speech that captivated, really, the world. It went viral. She spoke of the darkness of the tomb perhaps being for our world the darkness of the womb, and the idea that even in the darkness of the world, God might be working in those dark places bearing out into the world something new and loving and kind that might bring about change. So this week I looked to her for some wisdom. She wrote this about the current situation. She said, "Our most powerful response to the horror in Israel and Palestine is to refuse to surrender our humanity." She said, "You will be told by some that the deaths of Israeli children are unfortunate but inevitable because Israel's occupation of Palestine is brutal and wrong. You will be told by others that the deaths of Palestinian children are unfortunate but inevitable because it is the only way to keep Israel safe from terror, and Hamas brought this on its own people. Both will say our aggression is the only response to their aggression, our fear more justified than their fear, our grief more devastating than theirs ever will be; but, oh, my love, the hierarchy of pain is the old way. The moment we allow our hearts to go numb is the moment we shut down our own humanity." Valerie says, "I don't know the solution to the conflict in Israel and Palestine, but I do know the starting point is to grieve their children as our children. It's the only way to break the cycle. To my loved ones who are Israeli and Jewish and Palestinian, I see your searing pain. I love you and I grieve with you, and I'm reciting my ancestors' prayers for protection as you search for your families and bear the unbearable. May love find you through the impossible, and to all of us witnessing this story, this unfolding, we must ask ourselves what does love want us to do? If you cannot look at the news and the images, it's okay. Step away, be with the Earth, go to the trees, let them breathe through you. Remember that you don't need to do all the things, just the ones that are yours to do. If you want to help, but

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you don't know how, begin in relationship. Who in your life is hurting from this? Offer to walk with them, to listen to them. There is no fixing grief, only bearing it together. Only then do we know what to do next. If you are falling apart, your breathlessness is not a sign of your weakness but of your strength, of how deeply you feel the horror, how deeply you care. The fact that you still feel is something to applaud. Still feeling. That matters in a world that doesn't want us to feel. The question is who can feel it with you? Who can breathe with you? Opening our hearts to grief, to the grief of others and our own. It's how we hold our humanity in a world that would destroy it. It's how we begin to survive this together.”

Some may say that Valerie's thinking is...is naive or even a shallow platitude, but it's neither. Holding the tension of the moment and choosing to love with intention is our only way through. It's our only way back to ourselves. It's our only way back to our true home in God, and Ruth knew something about this. Ruth knew something about what it means to persist even through grief, because that's what Naomi was feeling, to persist even through heartbreak because that's what Naomi was feeling, to bear with...to bear with her beloved even through pain because that's what Naomi was feeling. We won't get the rest of the story for a while. It will leave us wanting. We won't know what this type of love will do until later, but what we know this morning is that Ruth's decision...Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi, to bear with her, acknowledged Naomi's full humanity. It validated Ruth's as well. These two women that should not have been bound together chose to be. They chose to let love lead the way, and in that, ultimately, God was at work; and in that, ultimately, God was glorified. So I'm not sure how to tell you to sit with what you're feeling this morning, but to say to do your work. As Valerie challenges us. Who in your orbit is in need of care? Who is feeling pain? Who might you walk alongside? Who might you open your heart to in their grief and In their fear? How might your opening return you to yourself and to the world that God so deeply loves?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.