

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale
Sunday, June 28, 2026

All right, friends. Let us take some deep breaths and prepare to hear the word of God. We breathe in God's mercies and we breathe out God's mercies to others.

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Gracious and holy God, be with us as you have promised. Fill this space with your spirit. Fill our hearts with your spirit that we might attune ourselves once again to you. Let us hear your word that speaks across centuries. Let us be ready for it to break open in us and in our very lives. Amen.

As we continue in our summer sermon series, Tell Me a Story, as Whitney shared with the children, we have found our way to the book of Ruth.

We will hear this morning in worship the words of the first chapter of Ruth. Words that you probably have heard read at weddings. At least a portion of it was read at mine, I will admit. But it sets the tone and sets the framework for the rest of the story which we will also talk about. So friends, hear these words from our Hebrew ancestors.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem and Judah went to live in the country of Moab. And he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech. The name of his wife was Naomi. And the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. And they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem and Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These two took Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about 10 years, both Mathlon and Kilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then Naomi started to return with her daughter-in-laws from the country of Moab, for she had heard that the Lord had considered his people and had given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you might find security, each of you in the house of your husband. Then she kissed them and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they might become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go your way, for I am too old to have a

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husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. But Ruth clung to her. So Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods. Return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you, 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. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus to me and more as well, if even death parts me from you.” When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went till they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And all the women said, “Is this Naomi?”

Friends, these are the words of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, the book of Ruth is a short book. It's got four chapters, four basic movements. And as I said a little while ago, many of us are familiar with the start of it because it's been used in weddings throughout numerous years. And our reading today gives us a glimpse into the problem that the story starts with, the grief and the deaths and the precarious situation in which Naomi and her daughters-in-law find themselves. They are husbandless and sonless. They have no male family members to speak for them and to take care of them. And so Naomi decides to return back home and encourages Orpah and Ruth to do the same. We can see a bit in our text from today Naomi's deep, deep grief. It is a grief that she carries with her throughout at least half of the story of Ruth. It's a grief that one cannot understand unless one has lived it. But it is a grief that is real and raw and impacts her relationship and her worldview, her vision of the way that the world is working. So she returns home, to her home, in her own words having no hope, not knowing what would happen next or who to trust or what to do. But Ruth will not leave her. So Ruth goes with her to the unknown in Bethlehem. And there they are, as our text gives us the tiniest little glimpse, they are treated a little skeptically. welcomed warmly but not super warmly, one might say. They've been gone for many years, and, as I said, they come without male family members, which was a deeply important part of most ancient cultures at the time. So they find themselves in a new place with no one to care for them and no way to make money, no way to feed themselves. So Ruth wakes up one morning and decides to go gleaning in the field of one of Naomi's kinsmen. For those of you who may not know what gleaning is, it's prescribed in the book of Leviticus and in Deuteronomy actually that the Israelites were to leave the things that fell when harvesting, to leave those things in the field and to not pick up every little thing so that the widows, the orphans, the aliens in their midst could come and pick up the remnant, the

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leftovers. So, this was already built into Hebrew custom at the time, and Ruth finds herself gleaning in the field of Boaz. Now, Boaz stumbles upon her after a full day of her gleaning, and he treats her incredibly kindly in the text. She is an unwed woman in his field, and yet, when she tells him her name, he knows her story because he's heard of her devotion to Naomi to whom he is related, and so he treats her kindly, and he allows her to continue gleaning. In fact, he tells her to continue as long as she would like and tells his workers to leave her alone. Now Ruth finishes out the day and goes back to Naomi with some wheat and some grain that can help feed them. And when she tells Naomi of meeting Boaz, Naomi knows that he is a kinsman. And she says, "Ah, this is good. Keep returning to his field and glean as he has requested." So Ruth spends time with other members of Boaz's household, of other people that Boaz allows to glean his fields and builds a relationship with them and with Boaz, which then takes us to one night. Ruth comes home from the field, and Naomi gives her specific instructions to bathe herself and anoint herself with oil and put on her nicest clothes and go to the threshing floor where they're threshing the wheat and to lay at the feet of Boaz. This is a euphemism, friends, one that I don't need to get into. But you can tell that Naomi has asked Ruth to take, to go into a very vulnerable position. Women are not allowed on the threshing floor. The hope was that Boaz would be there alone so that no one would see her. And so indeed she does what her mother-in-law asks, and she goes and she lays down at Boaz's feet. And the text says that she startles him, and yet he invites her to stay the night. He lays his cloak on her, which is a way of claiming her as his, and says that there is another kinsman who is closer in relationship to Naomi, but if he does not want to claim Ruth then Boaz will.

So Boaz brings this kinsman and the elders together, and he gives the kinsman the first right of refusal of the land that belonged to Naomi's husband, Elimelech. And the kinsman says, "Of course I'll buy that land." And then Boaz goes, "And if you take that land, you are also taking on Ruth, the widow of Elimelech's sons." And this made the other kinsman pause a little bit because Ruth was a Moabite. She was a foreigner in their land. And he said, "I don't, I don't think I can do that." And so Boaz hopped right to it and claims the land and claims Ruth and marries Ruth, ensuring the future of the family and the kingdom of Israel, actually, because Boaz and Ruth give birth to Obed, who is the father of Jesse, who is the father of King David. Now, leaving out the possessing of the women the way the story tells it, this is...it can seem like a heartwarming story actually, a story of devotion and faithfulness, a story of commitment and community. But this story is also deeply subversive. It's a story about forced migration and fractured community. Even though when our text opened this morning, it said "in the time when the judges ruled," that's where the author has set the story of Ruth, scholars know that Ruth was written sometime post the Babylonian exile. And so post exile, those who are returning to the land of Israel, to the land of the covenant from captivity, are wrestling with some very real issues of economic

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stability, identity, questions of who counts as an Israelite and who doesn't after years of Israelites' intermarriage with foreign families, questions about who's in and who's out, who counts and who doesn't. And there are a pair of books included in the Hebrew scriptures, Ezra and Nehemiah, that tell one version of this story of the return from exile and to rebuilding the national identity of the people of Israel. It's the story of rebuilding Jerusalem, of building a wall that will then protect it from those outside. It is a story about enforcing marriage laws, about whose children counted as Israelites, now if families had intermarried, who was actually a child of the covenant as opposed to those who were cast out. Ezra and Nehemiah, as they tell this story, they land firmly on the side of purity is a nice way to say it. Their story is skeptical and in fact, xenophobic in very real senses about the other peoples, the other ethnicities and the other nations around Israel. And in some ways when you think historically, that makes sense. They are fighting to reclaim their identity as God's people. So, they're going to wrestle with what that identity looks like in a new place, in a new time.

The story of Ruth talks about what Israelite community looks like in this time and place from a different perspective, from the perspective of welcoming the outsider. Now, all of these texts exist in our scripture because God is at work in all of these texts. And Ruth is not just an outsider. She's a Moabite. They were long considered enemies of Israel. They were not to be trusted. It goes way back to that the Moabites didn't welcome the Israelites friendly enough when the Israelites were fleeing Egypt and came into the land.

Ruth knew as a Moabitete that this path that she had chosen would be very treacherous. There was no family member for them, and she was always going to be considered an outsider with constant subtle and not so subtle reminders. She is consistently, constantly throughout the book of Ruth called Ruth the Moabite in the text itself always setting her identity as other.

I said this is a super subversive text because it goes against one vision of the future in Ezra and Nehemiah but also Ruth is a threetime outsider. She's a woman. She's a widow. She's a foreigner. And she is the main and central character of this story. When we hold all of these things together, it is sometimes a kind of a shock that the book of Ruth even made the Hebrew scriptures. Women are the primary actors in the book of Ruth. There are not many books in the Bible in which that is fully the case.

So as we hold these things together, a text that is about devotion and loyalty and commitment and community also with a text that is deeply subversive, showing that at the time using people who at the time would have been excluded and discounted to move forward the story of God's people, it helps us think about and frame our modern world. Like many of the texts that we have

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in our scriptures, it's not something that just happened once long ago. These are things that are happening and that we wrestle with now. We, as a world and as a nation, are wrestling with economic stability. We, as a world and a nation, are recognizing, are wrestling with national identity questions of who's in and who's out, questions of who counts and who doesn't.

So what does the story of Ruth say to us? I think it's a two-pronged thing this morning. Ruth, like so many others in our scriptures, gives up everything she knows to follow. Her love and her devotion to Naomi and thus to Naomi's God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is described in the text itself as 'hesed.' Hesed is a Hebrew word for steadfast love and covenant faithfulness. It's a word that is most typically used to describe God. This word that is an attribute of the Almighty is used to describe a foreign widow in the midst of the people. She left the things that defined her. Ruth left the things that defined her as a Moabite for a new path, a new way. And the text shows us that the God for whom Ruth abandons everything is the God of the lowly and the stranger and the widow and even the God of the enemy.

This is a reminder, friends, that God's ways are not our ways and God's thinking and God's vision are not ours. We've talked the last couple of weeks about how God works through imperfect and flawed people, people like Moses and Joseph and his brothers. And today we hear a story about how God works through those that we least expect, those that we think don't fit.

Together it's a reminder that we can and should live beyond the walls that define and confine us. God calls us to leave behind the things that weigh us down, the markers of an identity that come from something other than God, to follow in God's ways. And God also calls us to tear down the barriers that we have built between us and others to see the world in different ways.

Ruth is one of only a handful of women that are mentioned in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. All of the women listed there are boundarybreaking, rulebreaking, conventionbreaking women. Tamar and Rahab and Bathsheba and Ruth. All who followed God in the midst of pain, in the midst of fear, in the midst of otherness, and yet followed faithfully, and without which, Matthew is clear, we would not have Jesus of Nazareth.

So as we sit with the text and as we leave this place today, the question for us, friends, is where is God expanding our boundaries?

Where is God calling you to a faithfulness that abandons the confines of self-definition?

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Where is God calling us to risk? Where is God calling us to let our walls down and see with new eyes all of those around us?

Where is God calling us to live hesed, steadfast faithfulness and loving kindness, to practice mercy and justice and love?

Friends, it's different for each of us, and there's probably a different answer for us as a community of faith together.

And yet the call of our faith is to wrestle with that question day in and day out. To respond to God the way Ruth responded to Naomi. "Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people."

Friends, may it be so this day and every day. Amen.