

Matthew 5:3-9; Ruth 1:1-22
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost; July 14, 2018
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Earlier this summer, I preached a series of four sermons on the Ten Commandments from the Book of Exodus. Today, we begin a four-week series on the Book of Ruth.

Perhaps one of the most beautiful and compelling love stories of the Old Testament, the story of Ruth and Naomi is unique in that it is the only one in which two women are the main characters. But like many of the stories about women in the Bible, it links their worthiness and value to their husbands and their ability to have children.

Located between the Book of Judges and the Book of Samuel, the story is set during a time of lawlessness in Israel. According to the last verse of the Book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."¹

From the Book of Ruth, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the church:

[read the text].

Chances are, most of us were introduced to the Book of Ruth at a wedding. Whether it was read or sung as Gail did so beautifully, we first heard the familiar declaration of love in the context of two people making their wedding vows:

whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God. Where thou diest, I will die, and there will I be buried.²

Hearing only these words, it's easy to think these verses are wedding vows. I admit, I was surprised when I discovered they were not spoken by one marriage partner to the other but by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law.

Later, when I got married, I began to understand why it might not be so surprising after all. They say when you get married, you are not only marrying your spouse but the whole family, including your mother-in-law.

Part of the purpose of that admonition, I think, is to remind women, in particular, that when you marry a man, you may find yourself competing for his attention with the other woman in his life – his mother, and sometimes losing. After all, no woman is ever good enough for her son.

Do you remember the television show, "Everybody Loves Raymond?" Raymond is the beloved son. Marie is his mother. Ray is married to Debra and they live next door to Marie. Throughout

¹ Judges 21:25, NRSV.

² Charles Gounod, "Entreat Me Not to Leave Thee

the series, Marie schemes and plots to keep herself the number one woman in Ray's life, constantly inserting herself between her son and her daughter-in-law, much to Debra's dismay and utter frustration.

So, yes. Some of us, like Debra, might feel "married" to our mothers-in-law sometime, but no one I know has knowingly promised her undying love to her mother-in-law like Ruth.

Not only that, but Ruth declares her love for Naomi despite the fact that Naomi has nothing to offer her. Usually, when you commit yourself in this way, you do so with the expectation that the other person loves you the same way and wants to spend his or her life with you as well. It's not unreasonable, either, to expect this person to offer you something that others do not: love, trust, respect, the possibility of children and someone to care for you as you age.

I'm not saying that you commit yourself only because of what you expect to get in return, but most people don't commit their heart and soul to someone from whom they know they have nothing to gain and everything to lose.

But that's exactly what Ruth does. She promises to stay with Naomi wherever she goes, whatever happens, until one of them dies, without any expectation of what she might get in return. In fact, Naomi makes it quite clear that she has nothing to offer. She has lost absolutely everything.

She is a foreigner in Moab, having migrated there with the family during the famine in her homeland of Israel. For ten years she has lived there and, during that time, her husband and both sons have died, leaving her alone with two other widows, no children or grandchildren; not a single blood relative. Without her husband and sons, she has no home and therefore, no future.

Her daughters-in-law have nothing to gain by staying with her. They are free to return to their own families. They can marry again and have children and a new life. But Naomi is completely bereft. She has lost everything that has given her life meaning and security. She has nothing left to give.

So, she urges Orpah and Ruth to go home. What have I left to offer you, she says? Even if I were to meet someone on the road today and get pregnant, would you wait for them to grow up so you could marry them? So, go on now. You don't want to tie yourself to me. You will only be sad and bitter like I am. Naomi just wants to go home and be left alone.

Orpah turns back at Naomi's urging, but Ruth persists, joining her fate to Naomi's, regardless of all the reasons she should not. She will follow her to a country that is a sworn enemy of her own and there, she will live as a foreigner in a foreign country, and "claim a strange god as her own, a god who, in her experience, has so far only dealt harshly with Naomi through famine and death."³

³ <http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryB/Pentecost22.html>.

There is no logical reason why Ruth would risk her future for the sake of someone who can guarantee her nothing in return, but she commits herself, nonetheless.

Clearly Ruth is offered as the model of faith and love we are intended to emulate. After all, the book is named for her. And her faithfulness is to be commended.

But, as Karoline Lewis suggests, what if we allow ourselves to be Naomi instead? What if we allow ourselves to claim, with Naomi, the times when life really stinks? What if, when we are in the depths of despair ourselves, we lament our sense of loss? Instead of bucking up and pretending that all is well, when it really is not, can we learn to be honest with ourselves and with God? Can we be vulnerable with each other? Can we admit that there are times when we need to be comforted, when we need to be companioned? Can we let ourselves be loved, even when we are empty and have nothing left to give?

Naomi has no qualms about bemoaning her situation, but because of her grief, she is unable to receive what Ruth offers – her unconditional, freely offered love. All she can see right now is a dead end. She is unworthy, abandoned by God and condemned to a life alone.

She does her best to discourage Ruth, even push her away.

Look at what has happened to me. I have lost my husband, my sons. Why would you want to be with me? Who would want to be with me? I am not meant to receive love and grace and blessing. What am I worth? Certainly not worthy of loyalty—or of love.⁴

Even after Ruth prevails and sets off with Naomi for Bethlehem, Naomi says nothing. Instead, when they get home, Naomi tells her friends her sad story. She doesn't acknowledge Ruth's presence, much less introduce her to them. Instead, she says, don't call me Naomi, which in Hebrew means "pleasantness." Call me Mara, she says, (which means "bitter"), because the Lord has dealt harshly with me.

Ironically, in Hebrew, Ruth's name means "friend," foreshadowing the important role she will play in Naomi's life, but for now Naomi is too weighed down with grief and bitterness to let her in.

Maybe you too are feeling like Naomi. Or maybe you have at some time in your life. Maybe you, too, have experienced a loss of identity and purpose, and found yourself with nothing to give. Maybe you have felt unworthy of anyone's love and concern, lost in grief and bitterness.

Just as we might wish for Naomi to see Ruth and receive the love she offers, when she so desperately needs it,

maybe [today] you [too] can hear God saying, every so softly and maybe just barely, "Do not push me away. Do not deem yourself unworthy. Do not think that I do not want to be with you. Wherever you go, I will go; where you lodge, I

⁴ Karoline Lewis, "On Being Naomi," in *Word & World*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring, 2013, p. 174.

will lodge; you are mine. Who you are, who you have been, and who you will and can be, I love, with my whole heart, forever and always.”⁵

This is the commitment Ruth makes to Naomi and this is the commitment that God makes to us. But unlike Ruth and Naomi, death will not separate us from God, not now, not ever.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 175.