



“A Love Story”
Scripture – Ruth 1:1-19a
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 1, 2019

Come with me as we venture back a thousand years before the birth of Jesus when the Hebrew people were engulfed by a famine. Life became so desperate that many fled their homeland of Judah and trekked to neighboring countries to avoid starving. One family that made this journey—a husband, wife and two sons—traveled from Bethlehem to a country called Moab, a mountainous region of present day Jordan. It was foreign territory; everything was unfamiliar; but they could find work and food there. They could survive.

The family of four traveled to this alien land in hopes of escaping hardship, but affliction stalked them. Not long after settling in Moab, the father died, leaving the mother alone to make ends meet and to raise their two sons.

The mother, whose name was Naomi, felt the weight of the world. She was grieving the death of her husband, living in a strange land, straining to scratch out an existence, and struggling to raise two boys.

When someone you love dies, it knocks you off stride. You may be capable of maintaining your routine and performing your chores, but you do not glide through them with the same ease. Your footing is less certain, your ability to concentrate wanes, and the light in your eyes dims.

Naomi willed herself forward. With two boys to care for, she had no choice. Somehow she managed. When the boys became teenagers, they became aware of girls and it was not long before each of them was drawn to a young woman who was a native of this foreign country. It was not exactly what Naomi had envisioned for her sons.

William Willimon imagines the conversation between Naomi and one of her sons:

“Now, son, it’s not that what’s-her-name is a bad girl.”

“Mother, her name is *Ruth!*”

“All right, all right. Ruth. It’s not that Ruth is a bad girl; it’s just that her people have peculiar customs. She’s a little...different.”

“What you’re trying to say is that she’s a Moabite, right Mother?”

As you might imagine, Naomi was unsuccessful in preventing her sons from falling in love with local girls. How were her boys supposed to find nice, middle-class Jewish girls in Moab? So, in a few months, Naomi finds that

she has not one, but two Moabite daughters-in-law: Orpah and Ruth. The mother tries to make the best of the situation, but it's a tad bit awkward.

"Dear," she says to Ruth one day, "You have such a naturally pretty complexion; don't you think you could get along with a little less make-up? And, you're not thinking about getting a tattoo, are you?"

As some of you know, being a mother-in-law is not the easiest job in town. However, over the years, Naomi began to appreciate some of the young women's qualities and a bond began to develop. Thank goodness, because calamity was poised to strike again. Naomi was walloped by every parent's nightmare. One of her sons died and the heartache was overwhelming. And while reeling from the death of her son, the inconceivable happened. Her one remaining son also died.

I suspect the sadness in her soul robbed her of her appetite and her strength. She might not have endured the bitter blows had it not been for her two daughters-in-law. Their shared losses drew the three closer together than ever. They cared for one another, they learned to lean on each other, and they began to depend on each other.

While the three were recovering from the devastating blows that death had dealt, living conditions began to improve back in Judah. The drought ended, rains brought back the crops, and Naomi began to hear her native land beckoning her home. Having been forced to bury her husband and two sons in a foreign land, I suspect she was determined to return home before she perished. She made plans to return and told her daughters-in-law that she would soon depart.

To Naomi's surprise, they both said, "We're going with you!" Naomi was deeply moved by their loyalty, but she knew that Israel did not hold a promising future for them. She insisted they stay in Moab where they could find new husbands and start a family. Orpah saw the logic of Naomi's plea and stayed in Moab, but Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and refused to leave her side.

Naomi had come to love Ruth dearly and did not want to strap Ruth with an aging mother-in-law. She insisted that Ruth stay with her own people. But Ruth was fiercely determined and her devotion to Naomi was unshakable. She responded to Naomi with one of the most beloved and lyrical passages in all of Scripture. She said, "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."

Her words stand as a testament of the devotion of one human being for another. They speak volumes about commitment and determination, sacrifice and selflessness.

In most ways, the modern world has far surpassed the ancient world. Our insights into the physical universe, our modes of transportation, and the amazing array of technological devices are light years beyond the wildest dreams of the ancients. However, sometimes ancient spiritual wisdom holds gems that seem to have been forgotten.

The story of Ruth illustrates the depths and demands of authentic love. By comparison, talk of love in our day often seems superficial. Movies, books, and on-line dating sites generate lots of conversation about love, but most of the time love is described as little more than a feeling. Love is a special feeling, a warm feeling, a wonderful feeling. Love is a unique feeling, a thrilling feeling, a passionate feeling. But in the end, many people imagine that love is almost entirely a feeling. Then we are surprised when someone says he's getting divorced because he just doesn't have the same *feeling* that he did when they first fell in love.

I knew a man who waxed eloquent when telling his young daughter how much he loved her. He would say: "You're so precious to me. You're so dear. Honey, I just love you so much."

But when she needed him to buy something for her, he made an excuse. He never showed up at her school events. And on those occasions when she needed a ride somewhere, he was always more than an hour late.

He would say, “I love you so much,” and for quite awhile she believed him because she wanted to believe it was true. However, as she grew older, she figured out that words do not always mean much and love is a great deal more than simply a feeling.

As our story of Ruth so beautifully illustrates, love is not selfish. It considers not only one’s own personal needs, but also seeks what is best for the other person.

Naomi’s love for Ruth meant that she was willing to sacrifice her own well-being for what she believed was in the best interest of her daughter-in-law. With no husband or children, Naomi’s life would have been far easier and her future more secure if Ruth remained with her. Without Ruth, she faced a lonely life. Yet, she loved Ruth enough to put her own well-being at risk. She loved Ruth enough to advise Ruth that her best shot at a bright future was to remain in her native land.

But Ruth responded with her own sacrificial love. She knew she would be more likely to find a husband in Moab. But her devotion ran so deep that she could not bear to think of her mother-in-law spending the remainder of her life alone. So, Ruth said to Naomi, “Say whatever you want, but I’m coming with you.” Love makes sacrifices.

The story of Ruth also shows us that genuine love must include commitment. When storms blow in, relationships can unravel. However, when people are committed to one another, they will not allow adversity to pull them apart. They face the blows of life together. They support each other and their bond grows more robust.

Finally, the story of Ruth illustrates that when people are committed to making a relationship work, and they are willing to make sacrifices for one another, it plants seeds of hope.

Had we read the entire story of Ruth, we would have discovered that life turned beautiful for both Naomi and Ruth. Ruth accompanied her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem where Naomi helped Ruth find a new husband. And when Ruth and her husband had a son, the joy returned to Naomi’s life as she helped to raise her grandson. And if you know the full story, you know that the joy went well beyond their small family. Ruth’s son grew up and had a son of his own. He named that son David, who became the greatest king of Israel.

When two people are committed to each other; when their love is more than simply a feeling, when their love is founded on devotion and determination and a willingness to sacrifice for the other, doors swing open, light spreads, and hope blossoms.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Abundance —
who planted a garden teeming with life
and gave us trees yielding fruit to enjoy —
You bless us with the gifts of creation,
and lavish us with grace.

In the beginning
you called humankind to labor in your garden.
But we turned against you and one another,
failing to conserve your creation,
failing to care for fellow creatures,
failing to tend your creative vision.
So you sent us forth from Eden,
to till stubborn soil and farm unforgiving lands,
to do the work of bringing forth and sustaining life.

Ever-faithful, you did not abandon us,
but moved in, among, and through your people
to preserve life, even in the most desperate places.

When famine befell the land of Egypt,
you awakened Joseph to your dream of plenty,
and empowered him to provide for your people.
While our ancestors wandered in the desert,
you sustained them with manna from heaven
and water from the rock.
In the days of Naomi and Ruth,
you transformed barren fields into a House of Bread
and filled the hungry with good things.

In the fullness of time,
you sent your Son —
the Bread of Life to satisfy the hungry,
Living Water to quench our thirst.

Jesus sat at table with tax collectors and prostitutes,
and shared many a meal with sinners and outcasts;
he fed the multitude from a young boy's meager stores,
and celebrated one last supper
with friends who would betray and deny him.

And now, he prepares a feast before us,
reminding us that — still —
you fill the hungry with good things.

As we gather around this, our family table,
pour out your Spirit upon us
and upon these — creation's gifts,

that the bread we break
and the cup we bless
might unite us with you and one another.
Take our famished hearts and thirsty souls
and fill them with your love and grace,
that we might be sustained for the journey of faith
and strengthened for your service.
As you give so freely, O God of Life,
inspire us toward a greater generosity,
that we might bear witness to your Word that satisfies,
your love that nourishes,
and your grace that sustains.
Send us out, filled once again with good things
but hungry for a world that resembles your kingdom.

This we pray in the name of your Son, the Bread of Life,
and offer the words he taught us: **Our Father ...**