



“Ruth’s Vow”

Scripture – Ruth 1:1-19

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 5, 2024

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God.” Many who have no religious faith and have never cracked open a Bible are familiar with these words because couples choose this verse to be read during their wedding ceremony. Many of them are oblivious to the fact that these words are not spoken by a starry-eyed couple pledging to journey the years together in the bond of marriage. Rather, they are spoken by a young woman named Ruth, to her mother-in-law, Naomi.

If you like short stories, the Book of Ruth is one of the best in the Bible. It includes a natural disaster, personal suffering, romance, loyalty, and sacrificial love all in just four pages.

To set the scene, we travel back through time 3,000 years when the Hebrew people were engulfed by famine. Desperate to avoid starving to death, many abandoned their homes, took what they could carry, and traveled to another land. 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; but they could find work and food. They could survive.

Hoping to escape hardship, this family of four carved out a new life, and all went well – for a while. But then, a crushing blow: the father died.

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, and straining to scratch out an existence. Without extended family living nearby, she would likely have been reduced to begging if it were not for her two sons.

After some time, she had something to celebrate. Each of her sons married women from their new environs. However, the storyteller has hinted to us of looming tragedy. One son’s name was Mahlon which means “sickly.” The other son’s name was Chilion which means “frail.” As foreshadowed, both sons died. Naomi was without her husband and her sons, and therefore without any source of income.

Many of you know the grief of losing your spouse. Some of you know the searing pain of losing your child. You know the tears, the emptiness, the fear, the despair. Questions loom large. How will I go on? Will the sadness ever dissipate? Can I keep from turning bitter and becoming resentful of others? Some of you can identify with Naomi far better than I.

Our storyteller reports a turning point. The drought back home had ended and life in Bethlehem was returning to normal. Naomi viewed it as a chance to return to her native land. After all, it was in this foreign land that she had buried her husband and two sons.

So Naomi began the journey back home. Her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth set out with her, but all three knew that the best option for the two young women was to stay in Moab. That way, they could remarry and revive the possibility of a decent life; perhaps even have children.

Naomi thanks them for their devotion to her and to her sons and says, "Go back each of you to your mother's house...(And) may the Lord grant that you find security, each of you in the house of (a new) husband."

It is a tearful farewell. The three have endured grim times together and the bonds of love are mighty. Naomi knows that she might not have endured her three losses without the support of her two daughters-in-law. To Naomi's surprise, they both say, "We're going with you." Naomi is touched by their loyalty, but knows that a foreign land does not hold a promising future for them.

Orpah sees the logic of Naomi's advice and stays in Moab. However, Ruth clings to her mother-in-law and refuses to leave her side. Her devotion to Naomi is unshakeable. Ruth knows that a childless widow is extremely vulnerable. Ruth's head may be telling her to stay with the safe and familiar, but her heart brings other words to her lips: "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."

Recently I read a piece that contains echoes of this story of Naomi and Ruth. Jennifer wrote that for months after losing her loved one, she lived in the house of grief. She said, "some rooms were stripped bare lacking any comfort. When she fled those empty chambers, she found other rooms overstuffed with mementos, scraps of paper, and heavy furnishings. Still, she felt safe there in the house of grief."

But one day Jennifer heard a knock. "Following the sound through the empty rooms and the full ones, she found a door. Until then, she did not know that the house of grief had a door to the outside. The door was heavy, but she pushed with all her might and at last it creaked open. On the doorstep stood Goodness with a covered dish in her arms. Right behind her was Mercy carrying a huge bouquet of flowers."

That is when she realized that the house of grief "had protected her from kindness; but she still could not let them all the way in. But they sat in the garden, Goodness and Mercy and Jennifer, and they ate and talked and cried and laughed. This house, they told her, was a sturdy place to stay for a while, but there were other things to see in the world besides its small rooms. And they assured her that they would go with her all the way."

Jennifer says that “sometimes she goes back to grief’s house to visit. But most of the time, she lives now in God’s house where the meadows are green and the waters are still. And Goodness and Mercy are right there, just over her shoulder, reminding her that she is not alone and urging her onward.”¹

Jennifer’s friends sound like a contemporary version of today’s biblical account. They know that love is not simply a sentimental feeling, but also sacrificial loyalty. They know that love is not merely affection, but calls forth determination and steadfast presence.

Ruth’s vow to accompany her mother-in-law wherever it took her was brimming with risk. Leaving her homeland and becoming a foreigner would land her in a precarious situation. Her prospects for marriage would be greatly diminished. Yet, her concern for her vulnerable mother-in-law was so powerful that she accepted the risks. What can we say, other than she was driven by compassion?

Ten days ago, José Andrés, the founder of World Central Kitchen, spoke at a memorial service at the Washington National Cathedral for the seven aid workers who were killed when Israel bombed their vehicles in Gaza. He told everyone that the seven workers – Saif, John, Jacob, Zomi, Jim, Kirbs, and Damian – placed themselves in harm’s way so that hungry people would not starve. In desperate situations, some people rise to the occasion.

Andrés reminded those gathered for the service that their example “should inspire all of us to do better – to **be** better.” He drew brief sketches of each of them.

Saif was a driver and a translator. He had graduated from college in the UAE but had returned to Gaza to help his family run their business – a flour mill. He was very close to his family, especially his mother. He was driving home to see her when their convoy was bombed.

John was a former Royal Marine Commando, and a father of three children. He never missed a chance to tell his family how much he loved them. He inspired everyone around him and made them feel loved and protected.

Jacob was a problem solver and a moral beacon. He was tough, fit, disciplined and smart. But his kindness shone through it all. He was especially focused on making children feel loved and safe. His smile won people over and all the kids called him Uncle Jacob.

Andrés described Zomi as the living, breathing, smiling heart of the World Central Kitchen. More than the food she prepared and handed out, she dished out joy. She nourished the soul of everyone she met. Her tenderheartedness was contagious.

Damian joined World Central Kitchen on Day One of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He helped refugees as they arrived at the train station in his hometown in Poland. He traveled to many more disasters because he had an irrepressible passion to help.

Jim was kind, honest, and compassionate. An avid rugby player, he taught people how to respond to trauma. He taught first aid to civilians in Ukraine when war broke out. His family knew they could not stop him from showing up in dangerous places to help people who were desperate.

James was adored by everyone he met. A veteran of British military tours in Bosnia and Afghanistan, he was driven to help people in need because of the compassion he felt at his core. His friends said that the largest part of his body was his heart.

José Andrés said, “We suffer alongside the families of our seven heroes...But we also see the light in these places of suffering. People overcoming immense challenges. People who will not be deterred from helping people (in need).”

He went on to say that the aid they provide people in these desperate situations – whether war or natural disaster – is not only food, but presence. They face the mayhem alongside them. They remind people who suffer that “they are not alone in the darkness.”²

Like Ruth, the seven World Central Kitchen aid workers knew they were putting themselves at risk, but they did what their heart was beckoning them to do. The whispers of God were urging them to save lives by feeding people desperate for food.

Ruth’s vow declared that she would not make the easy choice, nor the safest choice. Love does that sometimes. It sparks courage and compels compassion. Sometimes we must trust the whisper in our soul even if it means taking a risk.

NOTES

1. Jennifer Ruth Lynn Garrison, *the daily devotional of the United Church of Christ*, April 16, 2024.
2. The information about the memorial service was from the talk given by José Andrés entitled “The Best of Humanity,” on April 25, 2024.

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Eternal God, you create us in your image, embrace us as your children and grant us the freedom to live abundant lives. As we gather at this table make us mindful that we are never alone. You are with us always.

God, we pray that you will fill us with Christ-like compassion.
Fill us with Christ-like compassion. (Silence)

God, bolster our courage.
Bolster our courage. (Silence)

God, fill us with a thirst for justice.
Fill us with a thirst for justice. (Silence)

God, infuse us with strength.
Infuse us with strength. (Silence).

God, instill within us a passion for peace.
Instill within us a passion for peace. (Silence).

Gracious God, pour out your Spirit upon us, that we may be more Christ-like in thought, word, and deed. Send us out into the world to live for others, as Christ lived for us.

Through Christ, with Christ, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, we pray the prayer he taught us to pray, saying: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**