

Family by Choice
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ruth 1:1-17

It's amazing what love can do. I remember a church member who was going through a difficult time in her life, and yet she knew, despite all the challenges she was facing, that she wasn't alone. Her church family was walking with her every step of the way, helping her out in every way they could. She said to me one morning, *"Pastor Jenn, this is the place where I'm loved, and the people that I love."* It humbled me because this woman did so much for all of us through her quiet, faithful ministry in this church, and yet her heart was full of gratitude for what God was doing for her, through this community of faith.

Now I don't believe for one minute that the Monroe Congregational Church is the only place where that sort of thing happens. If we are fortunate, we find community in many places; our school, a civic organization, even on the sidelines of a soccer game. And I'm also confident that every congregation is a place where God's children gather to share wonderful gifts; wisdom and love, compassion and strength, the gifts of encouragement and inspiration, of joy and tender care in their own unique way.

Still, I think that sometimes we can get so caught up in other things and miss what's right before our eyes: the blessing of a loving, courageous, supportive community of faith – a gift from God, to each one of us, and to the world that God loves, the world God calls us to serve. Family by Choice. But then maybe it's just human nature to miss the blessings that are right before our eyes.

Perhaps that's why, every time I read the story of Ruth, I kind of want to shake Naomi a little bit to help her snap out of it. Why can't she recognize that God has blessed her in a most amazing and unexpected way, through the love of her faithful daughter-in-law, Ruth?

Then again, we can't blame Naomi for missing out on what is right in front of her nose: after all, she's suffered one misfortune after another – hunger, poverty, dislocation, living as a refugee in the land of Israel's mortal enemy, the Moabites. Things get even worse when her husband and both sons die. In that day and age these are the things that make Naomi – officially – a nobody. We can understand why she packs up and heads home, landing there with only her daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite, the one who adamantly refused to leave her, back on that dusty road to Bethlehem.

How ironic is it that Ruth: a pagan, foreign widow, about as low as it gets in those days, provides Naomi with a glimpse of undeterred, faithful, stubborn love – the dogged, determined love that someone once described as *"the kind of fierce, fiery love by which God pursues us"*? The Bible, you know, is just full of that sort of love.

These two widows are living on the edge of survival. They're not aspiring to luxury or riches; they're just struggling to get through one more day. The younger Ruth goes out every day and works hard in the fields to provide for Naomi, and under the warmth of that kind of consistent, persistent love, Naomi's heart slowly begins to open up. She actually starts to think about someone else's welfare – she thinks about Ruth, about Ruth's future.

Maybe it happens that way because Naomi can't even begin to think about the future unless she has some hope that there's actually going to be one. When we become trapped in despair, it's natural to think only about ourselves and the immediacy of the situation at hand, that's called survival.

Naomi says what mothers have said to their daughters through the centuries: "We need to find you a man." In those days, society provided for widows by making the man's closest male relative marry his widow, and Boaz is just that next-of-kin candidate.

In the midst of this awful situation she finds herself in, Naomi perks up to take the initiative. When Ruth and Boaz marry and have a child, that alone would have been a happy ending, but wait! There's still more, a twist that's too wonderful for us to have imagined: the baby, the son of a pagan foreigner, will be the grandfather of David, the greatest king in all of Israel, and, we Christians say, the ancestor of Jesus himself! Little Obed, the

grandson of Naomi the-no-longer-bitter, represents hope for the future, not just for this old woman and her daughter-in-law, but also for us today. I'll say it again, it's amazing what love can do in the face of hopelessness and despair.

And what a great story this is to hear as we prepare to enter our church's Stewardship season. Because if it's true that love can do amazing things, then generosity is the way we make that love real: generosity with our time, our talents, our money, our hearts, our selves.

Generosity inspired Ruth to follow Naomi, to give her loyalty and love even when Naomi was cranky and mean. Generosity inspired Boaz to make sure the two widows had more than enough grain to live on. Generosity inspired other women to rejoice at Naomi's blessing of a daughter-in-law who was ultimately more precious to her than seven sons.

The depth of concern and care that Ruth and Naomi and Boaz (and the village around them) had for one another is the kind of concern and care that builds churches, communities, and a better world.

So this is where we begin, with the church, because this is where we nurture the vision of a better world, where we work together to bring it to reality, where we do our very best to live out the gospel ideal of the beloved community. Our giving to the church is not simply paying bills, although that's a good and responsible thing to do.

Our hope is that the church is where we may renew our spirits, and receive love, and hear God's call. If we are too comfortable, we may get challenged here. If we are too challenged by life and its hardships, we get comfort here. Shaping a vision, and working hard to bring it to reality, through the power of God's Spirit in us: that is good stewardship.

But that's not all. Here, in church, we also think about the future. Yes, we have a great history, and we love to tell the story of all the wonderful things our forebears did long ago. Monroe Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, this magnificent building is the physical reminder of those who came before you and thought about you and provided a spiritual home for you, a church full of people with all kinds of stories and all kinds of gifts, sharing

the same hope of being a blessing to the world. Yes, you are heirs to a great legacy.

Like Ruth, someday you will become an ancestor to those who will come after you, seeking the same blessing of a loving community that, in turn, a blessing to the world. You have been blessed by the generosity of those who came before you. When you reach out to those in need around you, you are also reaching forward, to those who will come after you, to your own spiritual heirs. You are holding in your hearts and minds people you may never meet but who will be blessed because of you.

Ruth reminds us of the importance of being willing to cross borders. Will Willimon says that crossing borders is the very definition of 'mission'—whether the borders be political, geographical, generational, cultural, psychological, or sociological. Ruth crossed borders based on faith, on her confidence in Naomi and the stories Naomi had told her of the 'land of milk and honey.' Are we willing to cross borders to reach people in need? Will we go where Jesus goes? Will we make those who are not 'our people' to be 'our people'? Are there 'outsiders' in our communities, in our congregations, hoping to be allowed in, to be accepted? Ruth seems to demand that we attend to these questions.

Miracles happen every day when ordinary people like you and me decide to open our hearts and our lives to others, when we firmly resolve to let nothing and nobody deter us from the dream of a better world. Stubborn, faithful, undeterred love – it's a miracle, and you can see it every single day, here at the Monroe Congregational Church.

There will be more children of God who will come here and join our community because of the warm fellowship and bright hope that thrives here. They will become your family by choice. In your promise to support the ministries of MCC, you are making sure that this church will thrive and be a blessing to the world that God loves. So, watch your mailbox for this year's stewardship campaign information, and give it some serious consideration. May you continue to dream of a better world for all of God's children, and in every new day, may you will find your own heart opened, and your life transformed. God bless you. Amen.