

Ruth: Love and Loss
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ruth 1:1-18, Matthew 5:3-9

The move was made out of economic necessity.

Originally, the family was from Bethlehem, the city of David, in the region of Judah. But there had been a famine in their homeland for a number of years. Their food crops died on the vine, shriveled up and wasted. You know what follows famine, don't you? Disease. Uprisings. War.

Many people fled, trying to find new places for their families to live a decent life. Elimelech was among them, along with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. They settled about 30 miles away in Moab, a land of opportunity which welcomed them. When the two sons came of age, they married women from the area. Just as in our day, the refugee family begin to assimilate within one generation.

But then Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow. Both of her sons also died, leaving her two daughters-in-law widows also. In that patriarchal society, if you were a woman who was not under the care of a husband or a father, you had no means of survival. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth were nobodies.

Naomi heard that things were better in Judah, the homeland she left, now that the famine was over. She saw the journey home as her only means of survival; there, at least, she would have extended family to watch over her. There, at least, she wouldn't starve. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, to go back to their home villages, back to their families. She had nothing left to offer them but the freedom to find new husbands.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, did the sensible thing. She said a fond and tearful goodbye to Naomi; then returned home.

But not Ruth. Her love for her mother-in-law was just too strong. What kind of woman is Naomi? Is she an extraordinarily kind mother-in-law? We don't know. We do know that she describes herself as bitter, at least by the time her husband and sons have died. It is this bitter woman that Ruth chooses to follow, to walk beside.

I don't believe that God puts loss, pain and obstacles in our path so that we can experience the growth that comes from hard lessons, and I don't believe that everything happens for a reason. Of course, being human, we try and make meaning and see connections.

Sometimes, like Naomi, we lose the people we love. Those of you who have waded in those waters know that there's no way around that grief, only through it.

Sometimes, like Ruth, we need to pick and move from a place of fear to a place with potential. If we are open to it, we can learn and grow, and see God at work in the new life our wounds will eventually create.

I wonder if Naomi would have made it all the way back to Bethlehem if she hadn't been accompanied by her younger, presumably stronger, daughter-in-law Ruth?

When they get to Bethlehem, Naomi makes sure that Ruth is protected in this land in which she is a foreigner. Eventually, Ruth marries one of Naomi's relatives, a man named Boaz. Ruth and Boaz give birth to a child who is named Obed. Obed has a son named Jesse, and Jesse later fathers a child named David. That David becomes King David, and he is the ancestor of Jesus.

So when Jesus says, "Love your neighbor," he doesn't just mean just the guy living next door, or that family that live a couple of houses down and look like you; he's drawing on his own sacred family story of loss and displacement and telling us to especially love someone who finds themselves in a similar situation. The fiercely loyal love Ruth had for Naomi, are what make up the root structure of Jesus' family tree.

So when Jesus says, over and over, some iteration of "Love your neighbor as yourself," he's recalling the sacred story of loss, love and loyalty between his two ancestors.

Ruth's commitment to Naomi reminds us that love is an action. It's not just words, it's surely not just feelings. Love is the risk we take for the sake of others.

It's not just for couples, and it's not bound by gender.

Love is the sibling who rearranges her life to take care of her sister who is ill.

Love is the grandparent who adopts the grandchild in need of stability.

It is the neighbor who delivers soup and shovels sidewalks.

The teacher who goes the extra mile for the child who needs extra attention.

Love is the anonymous donation to the family in over their head.

It is one church member driving another to doctor's appointments.

Love is the act of resettling refugees, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless. Love is action that takes risks.

And it's counter-cultural. Today, it has almost become a sport to belittle people, to spew hatred behind a keyboard, to look for faults in our fellow human beings and publicly magnify them. This is the world in which our beloved children and grandchildren are growing up. Are we going to let those words and images be the only ones to which they're exposed? Or are we going to tell them other stories, sacred stories? Are we going to be sure they also hear words of love, grace, forgiveness and acceptance?

I hope that as you grew up, you were accepted and loved and nudged to be your best, by a parent or grandparent, or a teacher who saw your value. And I pray that someone along the way took a risk in loving you to your full potential. But if you don't have those memories (and unfortunately not everyone does), I hope that you have come to see God's Spirit at work in your life today, redeeming the pain and brokenness of the past so that it is not repeated.

Love is fierce and risk-taking and countercultural.

Love is a woman who would follow her mother-in-law into a strange and inhospitable place, trusting the nudging of the Spirit.

Love is a man who spoke out on behalf of those everyone else ignored or laughed at, a man who believed that religious rules came second to the call to compassion, a man who gave his life for the sake of love, who invited us to remember him in this moment in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup. Amen.