

OPUCC 11-5-06  
Walk With Me, I Will Walk With You  
Rev. Curran Reichert

**Ruth 1:1-18**

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth 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. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

Life is made up of a series of defining moments; moments of loss, risk, challenge, transformation, relationship and survival. “The way we deal with each of these moments determines who we really are, who and what we are intended to be, who and what we can become both spiritually and socially.”<sup>1</sup>

Today’s “story as it’s told is a simple one: It is the story of two women-one old, one young- both childless and vulnerable, both marginal to the systems around them- who find themselves dealing with limited resources, deep pain, a hostile world and great concern for the situation of the other.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a story about unconventional relationships. This is a story about women in relationship with each other; it is a story about women in relationship with the world around them. This is a story about women in relationship with God.

This story begins with refugees who are widowed and hungry. Naomi’s husband and sons die. She is without means of support. In search of bread, Naomi turns toward her former home of Beth-Lehem (“house of bread”). As widows Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth are considered nobodies. The system has collapsed for them, they now have to resort to last resorts, that is, the young women “should”, according to conventional wisdom, return to their parents, although their worth on the marriage market is forever compromised, and the old woman, Naomi, can only return to her people in Bethlehem to live

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<sup>1</sup>The Story of Ruth and Naomi: Twelve Moments in Every Woman’s Life by Joan Chittister, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Pages 1-5

<sup>2</sup> IBID

out her days without the promise of anything new or any delight. Conventional wisdom dictates that her life is over because her husband's life is over.

Orpah, the first daughter in law to Naomi, makes a safe choice she decides to stay in Moab where the chances for her to remarry are greater than they would be if she went to a place where she was unknown. It can be assumed, by her choice, that she will indeed marry again and life go on as usual. This would be considered, then and now, an honorable choice according to society's standards- she will cling to what is, in the hopes that it will be good again someday.

Orpah's choice is one many of us might have made under the circumstances, we have all made safe choices-to stay or to keep things the way they are. But that is not what's remarkable about this story-what makes this story stand out is the choice Ruth makes to stay with Naomi, more impressive than her staying is her incomprehensible and stunning declaration of covenant; to a woman who feels her life is over, Ruth promises a lifelong faithfulness, she promises her unwavering and support and care to Naomi.

The family of Naomi is in a distant land because they were driven there to survive a famine. Need and desperation drove them to be aliens in a strange land. Now, in turn, Ruth puts herself second to the needs of Naomi, and promises to make a life with her in a land strange to her, and holding the promises of a God she does not know. She says to Naomi,

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is one of loyal love (the Hebrew word is “hesed”). It is like God’s loyal love for Israel that remains constant even when the relationship gets tough. Next week we will read further in Ruth to find that the covenant between the two women does not end here. For her safety and protection Naomi will urge Ruth to marry Boaz and she will give birth to a son. However the child that Ruth bears, will not belong to Boaz, but will be recognized in the community as Naomi’s. Naomi will set the child, Obed “in her bosom and become(s) his nurse” (4:16). Ruth and Naomi chose to create their own family and care for each other without ceasing. This would indeed then and even now be considered an unconventional relationship. It presses us think twice about the beauty of families of all kinds, and the promises that hold them together, no matter what.

When I came out to my parents about being in love with Katie almost nine years ago, their first reaction was one of panic followed soon thereafter by fear. It took me awhile to understand what they went through...I believe that the panic came from not knowing what people would think if they found out that their daughter, their pride and joy, was in a same gender loving relationship. A relationship that based on my parents social circle at the time, defied- an unspoken but commonly agreed upon- conventional norm.

The fear that grew out of the panic shared the same root cause, if they (my parents) who loved me dearly, had so much concern about what others might think, then how would those who did not know me at all, how might they treat, and here comes the fear...how might they mistreat me?

Ultimately, my parent's unwillingness to accept my relationship with Katie for the first three years was based on their assumption that my loving her would cause me to suffer great pain and endure greater risk. They worried that the people who once cared for me would shun me, they worried that I would not be able to find work, they worried how I would ever fit in. Their worry paralyzed them, it paralyzed my relationship with them.

But, like Ruth, I was not worried about what society thought. I loved this person- Katie was just Katie that was all that mattered to me and I knew that the bond between us would see us through whatever hardships we might endure. It even went beyond that for me, I felt something that if I live hundred years I will never be able to understand or explain, I felt God had called Katie and I together-even though her world seemed so foreign to mine. Katie was a diehard Presbyterian who always knew she wanted to be a minister; all her friends were church people, social activists, and clergy. I was a recovering actor who was in seminary much against my better judgment, trying to sort the whole thing out and mostly waiting for someone to come along and tell me I didn't belong there.

But when I met her- I had a feeling that not only would we join our hearts, we would also join our ministries. It was a risky choice I suppose, an unconventional choice- two women in relationship with each other, two women in relationship with God, two women figuring out how to be in relationship with the church.

So... what am I asking you to take from all of this? I am asking you to think about your own relationships, especially your relationship with God. Are you playing it safe or are you willing to step out into uncharted territory? You see what this story asks of us is a willingness to risk being in an unconventional relationships of deep love and truth with each other and with the Holy One. Loving God, setting our lives in order according to that relationship, is incredibly counter cultural. Loving God, changes how we see the world, it changes how we participate in the world, and it changes how we behave with each other. I've heard some of you say, "my husband just doesn't understand why I love this church so much." Or "my wife thinks I spend too much time here."

This is an unconventional relationship we have with each other- rooted in our love for God. We are not here because we think we should be here, we are here because we want to be here, because we believe we belong here. We are not afraid to weep with one another, to laugh with one another, to speak our minds in love and to protect one another, that is what being in covenant with each other means to us. God has called us to risk a love that might be hard for others to understand.

Folks who are not a part of this congregation have called this the gay church, some people within the congregation have asked why we have to bring up the open and affirming all the time, there may be people who walk away from this sermon and hear little more than what I said about my relationship with Katie-but to get stuck there is to miss what's really at work here.

What I am interested in is getting below the surface, beyond the usual coffee hour niceties, to build relationships that matter. We are building a community that wrestles with the questions of our faith and will not settle for easy answers-answers that too often trivialize our feelings and deny our doubt. We are building an enduring relationship with each other and with God-one that can sustain whatever hardships we might face.

We always have choices to make, we can like Orpah choose safety, we can choose to stop right where we are and not go any further...or like Ruth and Naomi, we can continue to make bold choices filled with faith in a God who longs for our authenticity, a God who longs for what is deep, and real, and enduring.

Although it was written thousands of years ago, the story of Ruth and Naomi is my story, it is our story, it is God's story. I said at the beginning of the sermon that life is made up of a series of defining moments... choose each moment living fully and loving boldly.

Amen

