

Feast and Famine

Sermon 33 | Greystone Baptist Church | October 6, 2019

Ruth 1: 1-18

For more than 80 years Christians around the world have celebrated this day known as Worldwide Communion Sunday. The idea, which was first dreamt up by a Presbyterian Minister in Pittsburg during the worst of the Great Depression, was that we needed to engage in acts of unity, across all kinds of national and international boundaries. This pastor, Rev. Kerr, believed that it was good for us to remember others who shared our faith, who followed our Lord, and yet who did not share our race, ethnicity, or nationality. Rev. Kerr believed that the simple practice of coming together around our sacred table held great power. Power to remind us of our unity and one-ness with Christians around the world who also gathered around similar tables, to share this sacred meal.

I didn't find it in the research anywhere but I hope that Rev. Kerr saw the state of the world in 1933, saw the hatred, and dehumanization that was being projected onto people of color and Jews living in the United States and Europe. I wonder if Rev. Kerr understood the economic anxiety of his day and yet knew that there was something more powerful than money and more powerful than our national identities. I didn't find it in my research but I wonder if Rev. Kerr believed that if we could just gather around this table, we might remember that we were all brothers and sisters, we were all created and loved by God, that we were all welcome to gather around, and that we were all invited to eat and drink at Christ's table.

In 1933, when the tradition of Worldwide Communion began, people were hungry. There was famine in the United States because of the Great Depression. There was famine throughout the world because of global economic uncertainty, drought, and international poverty. There was an experience of scarcity that made everybody scrimp and save all that they had, so they could make it last as long as they could. Thinking about the abundance of tables like these, in times like those...I wonder if there were folks for whom communion was their only meal?

Much has happened since 1933, and still, 86 years later we find ourselves returning to the table and remembering our brothers and sisters around the world who are doing the same thing.

86 years later we are still familiar with global economic uncertainty. We are aware of the things that divide us from one another... We know that even in times of abundance, many experience a sort of spiritual famine... As they deal with grief, isolation, and a sense of meaninglessness.

Still we know that global famine, caused by our changing climate, renders millions of people hungry and without nourishment, each and every day.

We can be sure that *MOST* of the tables attended today are set in the midst of famine.

This is where the story of Ruth begins... with famine. ...Famine in the land of Judah, where Naomi and her family live. In Bethlehem, no less, a town whose name literally means “basket of bread”. As famines often do, this one caused migration. Judean families were forced to leave home in search of food and so Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons fled to Moab in order to find food.

Moab was a surprising destination because there was longstanding, unsavory history between the Moabites and the Israelites. Israelites are the descendants of Abraham, Moabites are the descendants of Lot. And since the conflict between these two patriarchs, the two families had been at odds with one another, for generations. There was to be no intermingling and certainly there would be no intermarrying.

So, when famine comes to Bethlehem, those living in the “city of bread” have a choice to make about where they are going to go. Elimelech could have taken his family to another neighboring land, but he chose to take them to the east, to Moab. Maybe there was food there? Maybe the drought had not reached the land of Moab. Maybe God had shown them favor. For whatever reason Elimelech, Naomi and their sons head to Moab for a new start. There, they find wives, Orpah and Ruth; and there they remain for a decade or so, until misfortune strikes again and all the men of the family die.

Naomi becomes a refugee once more, this time rather than fleeing because of hunger, she flees because of grief. The death of her husband and two sons has grown too much for her to bear, much less in a foreign land and so she sends her daughters-in-law away, back to their childhood homes, back to their families of origin and attempts to set herself free from the pain of her past. Naomi’s return home, back to Judah, would have brought its own set of uncertainties. How would a single woman be received at the border? If she were let back into Israel, after living in Moab, who would be responsible for her? Who would protect her? Provide for her? There was no guaranteed provision for widows in her world.

Perhaps this is why Ruth wanted to stay with Naomi? Maybe she knew that the future would be dangerous and uncertain but at least she was still young enough to marry. Maybe Ruth knew that she was their only hope?

As the women negotiate their future, who would go and who would stay, Ruth professes her commitment to Naomi, offering one of the most beautiful confessions in all of scripture:

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.

Ruth's actions have been characterized by the Hebrew word *hesed* which is translated as "loving kindness". Translation doesn't really do it justice, as we have no word for *hesed*. *Hesed* is when someone acts extraordinarily on behalf of another within the context of a close relationship. Actions of *hesed* provide protection and often work to ensure one's survival. *Hesed* is not a frivolous or random act of kindness from one stranger to the next. It is serious, life-altering loving-kindness that is born out of deep connection, love, and commitment. In many ways, the entire book is framed by Ruth's acts of *hesed*. From beginning to end, Ruth's selflessness is what saves both women from homelessness, poverty, and hunger. She is the ultimate example of *hesed*... of faithfulness lived out in relationship.

Some say that Ruth's example of faith lived out in acts of loving-kindness, *hesed*, provides a counter-narrative to the book of Judges which immediately precedes the book of Ruth in the Christian Bible. The book of Judges paints a pretty grim picture of what it means to live in faithful community. In the book of Judges, justice is exercised through brutality and military conquest, Israelites claim divine right to the land and all who dwell within it. Foreigners are seen as heathens and objects to be used or killed and all of this at the direction of a God who is at the helm, delivering people into the promised land. For those of us left asking, if this was truly God's mode of deliverance... Ruth provides a surprising alternative.

"In the days when the judges ruled," the story of Ruth begins, placing the reader squarely within the historical context of these most brutal years. "There was famine in the land..." and so Elimelech took his family and went to Moab. Right off the bat, we know that things must have been really bad because the book of Deuteronomy is very clear about Moabites. "No...Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted..." (Deut. 23: 3). But as the story continues, we begin to learn that the people of Moab may not be as bad as their reputation.

Ruth is one of the most surprising heroines of the Hebrew Bible. In times of famine, of military conquest, ethnic division, and inter-national mistrust, Ruth chooses not to run away, but to draw nearer to her mother-in-law, so that they might face their future together. In so doing, Ruth and Naomi create a new family, one that is unconventional and unlikely. And in this new family they protect and provide for one another so that they might survive all kinds of famine.

Most of us know very little about famine, at least in our first-hand experiences. In fact, we know a whole lot more about feasting, don't we? The tables we gather around in our homes and churches are often filled with more food than we could ever want or need. As this first bit of cooler weather comes in, some of us may already have Thanksgiving and other holiday feasts on our minds... yet today, on this Worldwide Communion Sunday, we know that others who are hungry, will also gather around tables much like this.

Even though we may not know a whole lot about famine in physical sense, all of us can understand famine in a spiritual sense.

Maybe we are suffering long-lasting pain or chronic illness, maybe we have been suffering so long that we are beginning to feel an absence of God, wondering if God is truly with us, working to heal our bodies and restore us to health?

Maybe we are dealing with famine that looks like grief. Grief following the death of a loved one, grief following the end of a relationship, or grief over something that has happened as we mourn a life that will never be the same again.

Maybe our famine feels like fatigue. Maybe we are exhausted, worn down and tossed about by the challenges of life that never seem to cease. Just before we come to our wits ends, we summon the strength to come to this place, looking for renewal.

Maybe in these states of spiritual famine we might begin to understand the feast of God's grace shared around this table.

In times of famine, both spiritual and physical, we tend to hunker down, to hold onto what remains and isolate ourselves from everything and everyone else. In the ancient world, when the judges ruled, and when famine came, Ruth provided another way. Rather than leaving Naomi alone in her grief, Ruth traveled with her to Israel, where she would be received as a foreigner. Ruth models *hesed*, loving-kindness, a way of self-giving so that another might live more fully.

As we consider our own states of famine and fatigue, I wonder if we might resist that tendency to hunker down, to cling to our own, and instead forge a new path forward, with our *new family*. A path that embraces our sisters and brothers in Christ, offering a unity and a sacrificial love that transgresses all kinds of divisions.

If we follow the example of Ruth, I believe that even in the midst global insecurity, we might find – at Christ's table - all the nourishment we need to feed not only ourselves, but to feed the world, heart, mind, *body*, and soul.

Maybe where there is physical hunger, we could offer food.
Where there is sadness and pain, we could offer companionship.
Where there is fatigue, we could offer rest.
Where there is loss, we might offer hope.
And where there seems to be no hope in sight,
 We might offer faith in our God who knows our names,
 who sees deeply into our hearts,
 and who is always offering a feast in the midst of famine.