

Where do we go from here?

Sermon 106 | Greystone Baptist Church | July 18, 2021

Ruth 1: 1-22

In many ways, today's reading from Ruth is a circular one, a story that begins and ends in the same place: Bethlehem. The story begins as four Israelites are forced to flee their homeland due to a natural disaster, famine. Doing what most migrant families do, Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons have to rely on their own resourcefulness, resilience, and perhaps a good measure of faith, in order to survive their circumstances. For them, this meant leaving Bethlehem and traveling to Moab. Truly, there was not a less desirable destination in all the world. For generations the Israelites separated themselves from the Moabites with both geography and folklore about how the Moabites were the descendants of Lot's incestuous acts. Because of the Israelite understanding of Moabite origins, there were laws forbidding proximity, relationship, and especially marriage between Israelites and Moabites.

It is kind of strange, when you think about all that the Israelites and Moabites had in common. They spoke the same language (albeit with different dialects), their cultures were very similar and they both espoused similar religious values (even though their god's bore different names). Despite all they had in common, however, as the Hebrew story unfolds in the Old Testament, anyone who is paying any attention at all will see that somewhere along the way, "Moabite" becomes synonymous with "enemy". Enemy of the Hebrew people – at least, and therefore enemy of the Hebrew God, Yahweh.

Of course if you were from Moab, the stories would be told from a different perspective and the once-clear lines between friend and foe begin to blur.

As the Hebrew story goes (that's the one we have in our Bibles) the sons of Elimelech and Naomi travel to Moab and take wives for themselves. The Hebrew word for "take" being the same one that is translated as "abduction" in Judges makes us wonder what kind of marital situation brought Ruth and Orpah into the story. Then, as quickly as we wrap our minds around the plot, all the male characters die, leaving the three women – full of grief, pain, trauma, and loss – to once again make their own way.

If the author were to pause here and ask the question: *Where does it hurt?* we might be in for a longer story. I suppose Naomi would have cried out in unbearable pain of losing her sons, a grief no parent should ever have to know. And in the wake of her husband's death, the layers of compounding pain would be enough to send any of us into deepest despair. Perhaps Orpah was still reeling from the pain of being taken from her home to be wed into an Israelite family. The trauma and shock of it all isn't the kind that just goes away. Maybe for her the loss of her husband was painful, yes, but also strangely liberating. And maybe the combination of those things ushered in a different kind of grief, one that rendered her different from and misunderstood by the others. And maybe Ruth was feeling much the same way as Orpah; after all, the two shared the same experience of *taken-ness*. But

somehow in her trauma, pain, and grief, Ruth responds differently and stays with Naomi despite her attempts to send Ruth on her way.

Pain, grief, trauma, and loss can do some crazy things. They can make us send everyone away because we just want to be alone. They can make us say that we want to be alone, when really what we want is somebody who can handle the raw emotions without needing to fix it, somebody who can just stick with us in our darkest nights, not claiming that light is on the way, but proclaiming through silent presence that we are not alone.

Sometimes when pain, grief, trauma, and loss compound in our lives – as they did for each of the women in this old story – there is no right answer. One scholar points out that when Naomi urges the Moabite women to leave her and return to their homes, Orpah accepts that gift and departs the scene without condemnation. While we continue to follow the story as it unfolds with Ruth and Naomi, sometimes we fail to remember that Orpah's departure is without condemnation. Perhaps what she needed was to leave, to walk away, to return home and start again.

As the story unfolds, Ruth somehow sees through Naomi's grief-filled words and decides to stay with her. She did not accept that *what Naomi needed* was to be alone and she made up her mind to stick with her. Maybe Ruth stayed out of generosity and compassion for Naomi? Maybe she was worried about how an older, widowed, childless woman would survive? Or maybe Ruth could see that what Naomi really needed was the same thing as she herself really needed... companionship.

Together, the two women form a friendship that defies all social expectation. Born out of the compounding layers of devastation, they discover a shared humanity that is stronger than the stories, assumptions, and prejudices they might have harbored for one another. Together they accept what *is*, and they choose friendship over expectation.

By this time Naomi had heard that the famine in Bethlehem was over. It would have been easier for her to return home without Ruth, the Moabite. It probably would have been easier for Ruth to return to Moab, where she would not face the multiple marginalization of sexism, racism, and cultural difference. By all worldly measure, the two would have fared better alone. But that isn't what they needed.

Somewhere, in the midst of their pain, they realized that they needed one another.

For two people who had suffered so much to have this kind of realization is pretty amazing in any circumstance. Grief and pain tend to drive us apart more than bond us together. So often these raw feelings and emotions wear the masks of arrogance, pride, defensiveness, and anger, each one driving a wedge between ourselves and everyone around us.

Go away! Leave me alone! We cry out, sounding a lot like Naomi.

But Ruth didn't follow directions. She didn't do as Naomi demanded, even though it probably would have been the most comfortable option. Instead Ruth decided to draw near to Naomi in a relationship of committed mutuality.

*Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people
and your God my God.*

This kind of dedication would be impressive if the two were coming from the same place, if their stories were similar, if they had seen one another as equals before tragedy struck their lives. But knowing what we know about how Israelites saw Moabites, this gesture of love and commitment is downright miraculous.

Ruth comes from a people who were marginalized, ostracized, and dehumanized by Naomi's people – for generations. And here was Ruth, just a few steps away from freedom, choosing instead solidarity and mutuality. Here she was choosing a future that would be irrevocably tied up with Naomi's.

How did she know *that* is what was truly needed?

Greg Jarrell is one of the founders of an intentional community on the west side of Charlotte, called QC (Short for "Queen City") Family Tree. He's also a top notch theologian, preacher, activist, saxophone player, and as it turns out... writer. In Greg's book called, *A Riff of Love*, he weaves together the principles of jazz music (Riff, Jam Session, Blues, etc.) with the realities of living with commitment and mutuality in his neighborhood, Enderly Park.

After moving to the neighborhood in 2005, Greg and his wife, Helms, slowly began building relationships with the folks who already lived there by hosting dinners at their house twice a month: everyone is invited. With time, hospitality, and lots of deep listening, the Jarrell family has become part of Enderly Park. They host a youth group and have summer interns. They grow a community garden, teach art and pottery, they go on field trips, host a Freedom School in the summertime, and all the time, they advocate for fair housing practices in Charlotte... the most urgent and important issue facing their neighbors as urban growth continues to urge land grabs and longtime residents of communities like Enderly Park face the perpetual threat of displacement.

Greg and his family constantly invest their resources into the neighborhood, offering food, friendship, and an embodied faith day after day after day.

In the book, Greg tells the painful story of a young man who was shot and killed on a corner near their house. As the neighbors learned of Khalil's death, they decided to host a vigil on the steps of the abandoned church that sits in plain view of the place where the

shooting occurred. Greg was asked to lead the vigil. Without posting a formal announcement or flyers displaying the time and place, neighbors gathered. Word got around quickly. There were so many in attendance that the sidewalks began to overflow with people who had come to mourn and grieve together. Several neighbors participated in the vigil. Danielle sang through her tears, beautiful notes of pain and loss pouring out of her lips in song. Others spoke, telling stories and offering words of support to Khalil's parents. The children write messages and tie them to balloons to be released into the air carrying unspoken prayers straight up to God in heaven.

The crowd of neighbors reached a size that began to interrupt traffic flow down the street in front of the church, a fairly busy thoroughfare. The media arrive and all eyes are on this neighborhood family gathering.

At some point during the vigil, Greg notices a small disturbance at the back of the crowd. It is quickly broken up by neighbors (who have a way of self-correcting). It happened so quickly that it went unnoticed to many. Greg probably wouldn't have seen it if he had not been at the microphone, speaking to the crowd at the time. He didn't think much of it and later learned that two guys who'd come to bear witness to the pain, grief, trauma, and loss of Khalil's death, had their tempers flare... Greg describes the scuffle:

"This hardly seems unusual. Packed tightly into a small space, and experiencing trauma unlike Enderly Park had experienced in many years, if ever, a couple of guys [got] overheated. In a testimony to the resilience of the gathered community, the potential for a large conflict was quickly resolved by another neighbor. Brother Keith gathered them in. A young man himself, just barely over twenty, he had the wisdom to offer them another way to express their rage. He helped create comfort by offering some extra space and a listening ear. He held his huge arm around one of the young men, and welcomed him into a safe place to let go of some grief." (83)

Later that night Greg turns on the news to find the whole neighborhood gathering – all the work, all the tears, all the energy and grief... all the beauty of the day's gathering – was buried under the lead: *Troubled neighborhood spills over into violence again at vigil for peace.*

"The reporter saw what he was conditioned to see... [his eyes] were trained to see trouble on our side of town so that is what he saw." Greg writes. The viewers also saw what they were conditioned to see, and it reinforced what they thought they already knew: *The inner city is the place of perpetual crisis, of constant danger.* (84)

Without any sense of holy curiosity or creativity, we (like the reporter and the local audience) allow ourselves to remain satisfied with the narratives that we have been taught about us and them.

Don't drive through that part of town at night.

That neighborhood isn't safe, you don't want to live there.
I wouldn't want my kids to go to that school.
Those people are violent, lazy, unmotivated, _____ fill in the blank with all the things we have been taught.

But as I read, and sit with the ancient story from the book of Ruth, I cannot help but notice that Ruth herself came from a *troubled neighborhood*. At least according to the Hebrew tradition (which we (Christians) claim as our tradition as well). We are descendants of Naomi's people, ours are the stories that rejected the Moabites, labelling them as perpetual other, outsider, unworthy, dirty... uncivilized, unmotivated, prone to violence... not the kind of people I want my kids to hang around with.

Isn't it ironic that Ruth, from Moab, becomes the ancestor of David, the great King? And through that same line, Ruth, from Moab, becomes the ancestor of Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer?

Isn't it ironic that Ruth is the one who teaches us – Naomi's people – what *hesed*, loving-kindness is all about?

Could it be that the only way to loving-kindness, to self-less, Godly, Christ-like love is through curiosity, listening, understanding, and an unwavering commitment to living life together, no matter which side of the tracks (so to speak) we come from?

Whether we are from Northwest Raleigh or Southeast Raleigh,
whether we are rich or poor,
 Israelite or Moabite,
 black or white,
 Jew or Gentile,
 Christian or Muslim,
 gay or straight,
what if *hesed* is only possible when we learn to seek it together, with stubborn commitment that understands that despite all appearances and narratives to the contrary, we are all connected.

Could it be that Martin Luther King Jr. was onto something when he wrote in his letter from the cell in the Birmingham Jail: *In a real sense all life is inter-related. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... This is the inter-related structure of reality.*"¹

¹ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/432654-in-a-real-sense-all-life-is-inter-related-all-men>

Could it be that it isn't so important *where* we go from here, as *that* we go from here together and with a sense of curiosity that allows us to ask questions about our neighbors rather than jumping to our own conclusions built on the stories we've been told about why they are the way they are?

Could it be that a piece of our salvation is still held in the womb of Ruth, the perpetual outsider, Child of Moab, and Mother of David, Jesus, Judaism and Christianity?

Could it be that we need to close our eyes because they resemble the eyes of the reporter who could only see trouble in the troubled neighborhood – and open our hearts to the God who is trying to liberate us from our prejudice through relationships that look and feel like the Kingdom of God breaking in... even here... even now... beginning with more questions than answers...

Questions that sound like: Where do you come from? Where does it hurt? and What do you need?

Could it be that through asking these questions and listening to the responses, words like "you" and "I" ... "us" and "them" ... might turn into "we"?

And as that miracle occurs, **we** might just discover together that **where** we go will take care of itself. Whether it's Moab or Bethlehem... doesn't really matter. What matters is that we go together, all of us, with curiosity, with patience, with joy, and with love.

(Poem from resource written by Rev. Sarah Are):

I wish I could draw you a map
of the next steps-
the next conversation,
the next brave truth,
the next fumble,
the next apology.
Wouldn't it be nice to know
what's coming?
Wouldn't it be nice to prepare our hearts?

But I don't know where to go from here.
I am a child with a flashlight –
deeply hopeful and a little nervous,
all at the very same time.

What I *do* know is I don't want to go
anywhere without you.
So I'm hoping that you will

take my hand.
See this truth.
Trust my voice.
Look for the good.
And day by day,
we can go from here,
because we were never meant
to go alone.

And maybe we'll get lost;
but then again,
maybe we'll be found.
So if you're willing,
if you'll just say yes,
I will let you hold the flashlight.
We can find our way,
step by step,
light in hand,
abolishing shadows
together.

Who needs a map
when you have
the light, anyway?