

Love's Journeys

Ruth 1:1-22

Isaiah 65:17-25

Crossroads Christian Church

October 27, 2012

Every now and then, just to take a break from the lectionary, I like to preach what I call a book sermon—it's where I lift up a particular book of the Bible and try to share its message as a whole. Today, I start with one of my favorites, the Book of Ruth.

48 years, 4 months, and 8 days ago, but who's counting, Sandy and I were up front at First Christian Church in Newton, Iowa, getting married! She had a bridal gown, I had a suit and tie, and the sanctuary was not, I repeat, was not, air conditioned against a mid-June heat wave. Instead of the Wedding March, etc., we had the congregation sing hymns, because we two religion majors wanted to make sure that this was a worship service as well as a wedding! Part way through the service, Carolyn Caylor, one of the members there, stood up and sang "The Song of Ruth." "for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people *shall be* my people, and thy God my God." We knew at the time that the song wasn't completely appropriate for a wedding, because it didn't have to do with romantic love or marriage, but rather with a bond between a grieving mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. But still it seemed right for us, and I'm glad that it was sung at our wedding, because we've hung together through seven homes in three states, numerous jobs, raising three kids and having three grandkids. Our commitment to one another has held strong—been tested and strained, of course, but still strong.

Love can take us to some of the strangest places—places we might never have dreamed of going otherwise. Each of us here could probably tell a story or two or more about where love has taken us. Some of you married a member of the military and traveled from place to place as your partner was assigned to new bases. Some of you have followed love's lead on mission trips to New Orleans after Katrina. Some of us have taken shorter journeys of love—to a hospital bedside, to visit someone in jail, to make a call on new neighbors to invite them to church; we go all sorts of places in the name of love.

The story we find in the book of Ruth is a journey in love; it is also a faith journey. It's a story of family bonds and faithfulness that defied disaster, famine, and cultural divisions. The Book of Ruth is set in the time of the Judges, a lawless time, when "everyone did what was right in their own eyes." The Book of Judges is a book full of murder and mayhem, blood and violence. But the Book of Ruth is a tender, gentle, deeply moving love story. And, rare in the Bible, it's a story that focuses on two women's stories. Naomi and her husband Elimelech, and their two sons, were displaced from their native Bethlehem by a famine. The village's name, Bethlehem, literally means in Hebrew, "House of Bread;" but there was no bread left in Bethlehem. The crops had failed. So the family moved to Moab—not far away by our standards, but it was still another country with its own customs, its own languages, its own gods. There they settled in, but after a few years Elimelech died, and Naomi was left as a single mother, a long way from home. Her sons grew, and married young women from Moab. But then her sons died as well, and Naomi was left crushed; a widow, an alien far from home, with only her two daughters-in-law as friends. And they were friends; all they had was each other, but they did have each other. Then Naomi decided to return to her family home at Bethlehem. Her daughters-in-law wanted to go with her, but she discouraged them from coming. "Turn back, my daughters," she said. "Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" Naomi felt that God's hand had turned against her. They all wept, and Orpah, one of the daughters-in-law, kissed Naomi goodbye.

But Ruth clung to her. Naomi encouraged her to go back to her home, 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!" And the two women set out together for Bethlehem.

When they arrived, Naomi's relatives had a hard time recognizing her, because life's battering had taken its toll. "Is this

Naomi?" they asked. And she said, don't call me Naomi (which means "pleasant" in Hebrew), but call me Mara (which means bitter), for God had treated her harshly.

There was no Social Security in that day, but the Law of Moses was deeply concerned for the weak, the widowed, the foreigner, and the homeless. The law in Leviticus required that farmers not strip their fields clean of the harvest, but that they intentionally leave portions of their crops behind as a gift for the poor; and as such, a gift to the God of justice and mercy. So Ruth and Naomi came onto the scene at harvest time. They decided that Ruth would glean in the fields of Boaz, who was a relative of Naomi's late husband.

Boaz noticed Ruth following his workers through the barley field, picking the leftover grain, and asked the harvesters about her. When he discovered that she was family, so to speak, he gave his workers orders not to molest her or stop her, and to lay aside generous amounts of grain for her. Then he told Ruth to glean only in his fields, and that she would be treated as a guest. Ruth fell at his feet and asked why he was treating a foreigner so well. But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge! "Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant." (2:11-13)

When Naomi found out, she decided to play matchmaker. She encouraged Ruth to doll herself up and go to see Boaz at the harvest celebration, and to spend the night. One thing led to another, as they say, and Boaz accepted Ruth as a next-of-kin widow, and made her his wife.

Ruth gave birth to a son. The women of Bethlehem celebrated, because Naomi now had her grandson and heir, and a family to care for her as she had cared for her own family. The boy was named Obed, who grew up to be the father of Jesse, who became the father of King David.

The story of Ruth is a beautiful, tender story of love and devotion, and of a God who worked out a happy ending to a terrible situation. We can admire Ruth's courage and devotion, leaving her own home and country to be Naomi's companion. The author of the Gospel of Matthew thought her story was important enough to mention Ruth in his genealogy of Jesus, where only a few of the female ancestors are named. "Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed was the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David the King" and so on to Jesus.

This beautiful, seemingly simple story of Ruth has a purpose behind it. Several centuries later, after the Jews had returned from exile in Babylonia, they became very exclusive. They rejected the people who had been left behind, because their religious traditions had been compromised by intermarriage with pagans. Here's the story that Nehemiah told: "In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves." (13:23-25 unquote) Somewhere in all that narrowness, somebody remembered, wasn't David's own great grandmother a woman of Moab? And they lifted up this story of Ruth to say that people of other races and nations can find their place among God's people. It's a story, then, that challenges our prejudices and fears, that speaks of the wideness of God's mercy.

Do you have stories in your own family circle about love's journeys, about how love and devotion kept people or families together through struggle and change? I invite you to name and celebrate those stories. And I remind you that although it's easy to blame God for the bad things that happen to us, as Naomi did, it's important to see the subtle ways that God delivers us from those bad times and brings healing and wholeness again. And I invite you to remember that it isn't the purity of our pedigrees

that make us beloved in God's sight, but the depth of our love and devotion to God and to those around us. Amen.